

Monster Tamer



12

Author
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Illustrator
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The cover features a romantic illustration of a young man with dark blue hair and a young woman with long, flowing light purple hair. They are both wearing white dresses with dark blue accents and are embracing each other. The background is a soft-focus green field with several red rose petals floating in the air. In the bottom right corner, there are large, detailed red roses. The title 'Monster Tamer' is written in a stylized, gothic font with a green outline, and the volume number '12' is prominently displayed in the bottom left corner.

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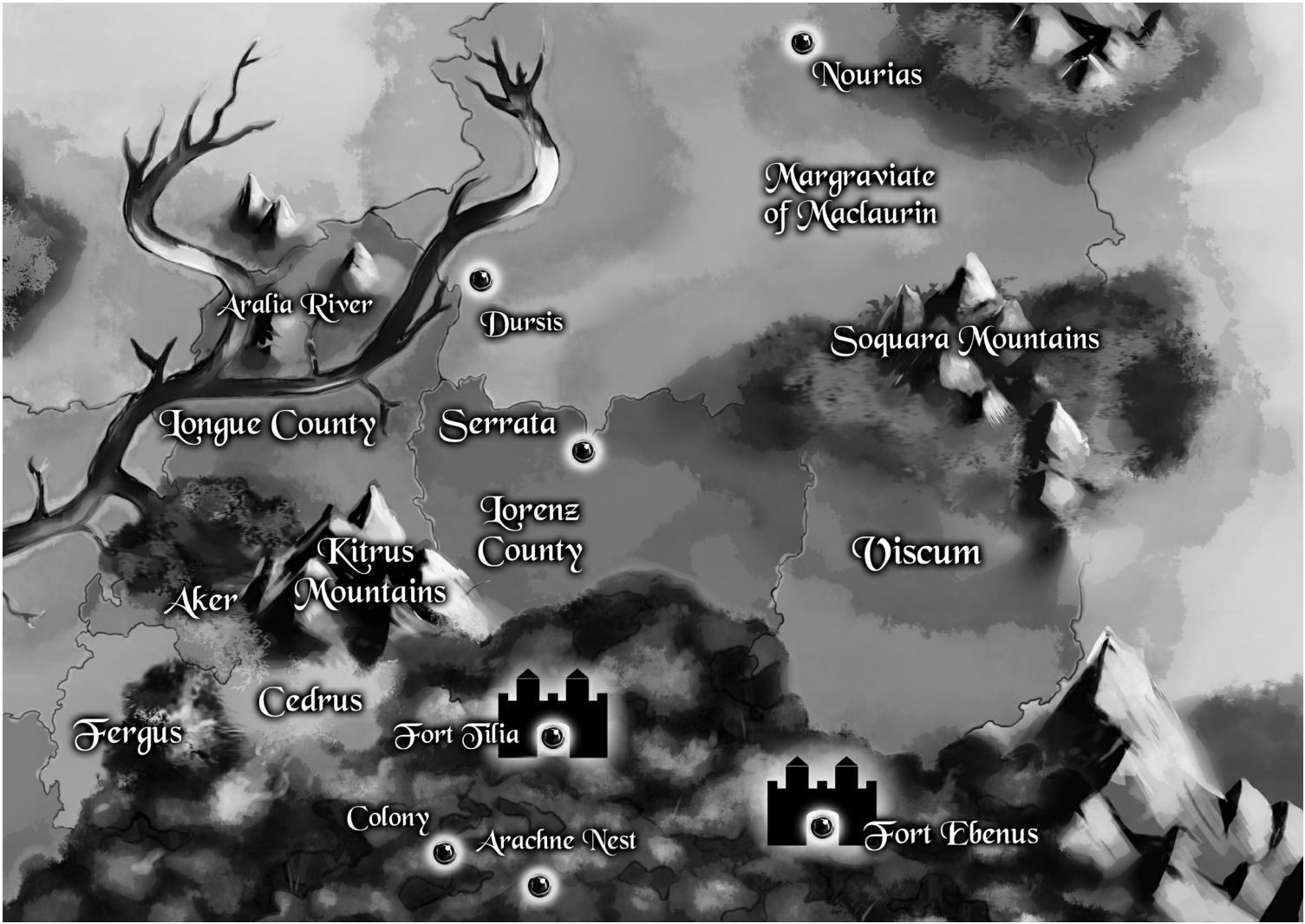


Table of Contents

[Cover](#)

[Map](#)

[Chapter 1: Remembering That Blessed Day *Rose's POV*](#)

[Chapter 2: The Puppet's Vow *Rose's POV*](#)

[Chapter 3: The Battle in the World of Light](#)

[Chapter 4: Defensive Battle on the Run *Rose's POV*](#)

[Chapter 5: Flight's End *Rose's POV*](#)

[Chapter 6: The End of a Stagnated Time](#)

[Chapter 7: That Night's Dream *Rose's POV*](#)

[Chapter 8: The Puppet's Secret Plan *Rose's POV*](#)

[Chapter 9: The Puppet's Love *Rose's POV*](#)

[Chapter 10: Rampage](#)

[Chapter 11: The Puppet's Way of Fighting *Rose's POV*](#)

[Chapter 12: The Puppet's Hard-Fought Battle *Rose's POV*](#)

[Chapter 13: The Puppet's Struggle *Rose's POV*](#)

[Chapter 14: An Unfulfilled Wish *Rose's POV*](#)

[Chapter 15: A Glimpse of His Destination](#)

[Chapter 16: Awakening](#)

[Chapter 17: The Change the Boy Brought About](#)

[Chapter 18: The Battle to Get Her Back](#)

[Chapter 19: Never to Let Go Again](#)

[Chapter 20: Proof of Righteousness](#)

[Extra Story: Majima Takahiro's Envoy *Kei's POV*](#)

[Extra Story: Together Forever](#)

[Color Illustrations](#)

[Bonus Textless Illustrations](#)

[About J-Novel Club](#)

[Copyright](#)

Chapter 1: Remembering That Blessed Day *Rose's*

POV

It was still early in the morning, and the sun had yet to rise. The Woodlands, which was gloomy even at midday, was covered in a thick darkness. After escaping the Maclaurin Provincial Army's clutches, we had taken our master, who was still unconscious from the Battle Ogre Edgar Guivarch's surprise attack the other day, along with the elves of the reclamation villages, and spent every day on the run.

Having no need to sleep, I kept a vigilant eye on our surroundings every night. The provincial army wasn't the only enemy looming over us; many monsters inhabited the Woodlands, so by all rights, people were doomed out here without the safety of large and sturdy walls. It was extremely dangerous to move as a large group through the Woodlands as we were.

We couldn't afford to be lax, not even during the night, so we were fortunate that several of us didn't require sleep. All around me, the elves of Kehdo and Rapha leaned against one another, their eyes closed. Their figures were dirty and haggard due to the harsh conditions, so when they slept like this, they almost looked dead.

We hadn't been able to properly prepare for our journey, so when combined with having to sleep on the hard ground, the group could only recover so much stamina. Also, with so many people moving together, monsters discovered and attacked us frequently. Even if we had multiple nighttime guards to deal with them, nobody could sleep comfortably with a battle raging nearby. The burden on them each time this happened must've been tremendous.

Looking at it from another perspective, everyone was hanging in there well in spite of our severe circumstances. Having been raised in reclamation villages, the elves had strong mental fortitude, but it was probably their trust in us that gave them strength. They believed that we could do something about the situation, so they were able to grit their teeth and endure this tightrope act.

These people had accepted us. They had accepted monsters, so I wanted to protect them. We *had* to protect them. They gave us the trust that our master had always sought, the trust he'd finally found in this world.

"Master..."

My hand unconsciously went to my chest, and I felt the small pendant beneath my clothes. Back when we'd first arrived in Aker, my master had given it to me on our date. It was a round jewel, colored madder red as if it had captured that day's setting sun. It was my treasure. Just its presence reminded me of my master's embarrassed smile and my happiness in that moment. I could feel that emotion that I still didn't have a name for.

I thought of my master as being more than simply my "master." I knew that. I could feel it. Just a little more, and I could reach it. Therefore...

"It's time."

I let go of the pendant and tamped down the emotions that had welled up in my heart. I had to go around and wake everyone up; another day had begun, and not a single one of us had given up yet.

Chapter 2: The Puppet's Vow *Rose's POV*

We departed before sunrise so that we could put some distance between us and our pursuers. We walked in silence to preserve our stamina, keeping a careful watch on our surroundings.

"It's about time for a break," Shiran suggested just past noon.

The elves sat down on the ground and stretched their legs. Everyone looked tired, which stood to reason. Just running away from their homes was emotionally taxing, but their enemy, the Maclaurin Provincial Army, was accompanied by the very symbol of righteousness in this world—the Holy Order. It took everything the elves had to keep their hearts intact.

They had to march in that condition for the whole day, resting only briefly at night. And those nights were spent in the dangerous Woodlands, meaning they couldn't get any proper rest. Altogether, this drained them considerably.

Shiran was in the worst shape of us all. As an undead monster, she depended on a supply of mana from my master, so without that available to her, she was mana deprived. Unlike Asarina and Salvia, who lived in his body, she could at least move around, but she was in poor condition.

Even in that state, however, she gave the elves directions with a stout heart. She knew that the group would fall apart otherwise, so she was pushing herself, but this was different from her previous self-destructive nature.

"Sorry, Rose. Can you go check on everyone for me?" Shiran asked, taking a seat on the ground to keep her mana consumption to a minimum. As she was now, she could still calmly analyze her limits.

"Of course. I don't mind at all," I replied. "Please tell me if there is anything else I can do. We cannot afford to have you collapsing on us, after all."

"I won't collapse," she said, smiling reassuringly. "We just have to hold on for two more days."

"Yes. Let's hang in there." I nodded, then started checking on all the elves.

“Rose, I’ll help too,” Lobivia said, her broken arm hanging in a sling.

“I will also make the rounds,” added Leah, the wife of Rapha’s chief.

“Oh, then I’ll bring over some bandages!” her granddaughter, Helena, chimed in.

We split up and checked on our fellow travelers. Many of them had been badly injured in either the attack by Travis’s knights or the one by the provincial army. Some could only be moved by cart. We had to get them the necessary medicine and bandages, all while keeping vigilant of our surroundings.

The provincial army had yet to attack us, but they were definitely on the hunt. With so many people, it was difficult to conceal our tracks, so it was best to assume they were gradually catching up. We had a plan to get ourselves out of this, but it was quite the challenge to get to our destination without our enemy overtaking us and without anyone falling behind.

“Hey, puppet,” Berta called out to me as I made the rounds. “Shouldn’t you go get the slime? It’s about time to switch.”

“Aah, you’re right.”

With everything I had to do, I’d forgotten about it, so Berta had gone out of her way to remind me.

“Thank you,” I said.

“Hmph, I don’t need your thanks.”

Berta huffed, and I headed toward our manamobile. My master was sleeping inside it. After Edgar had poisoned him, he hovered on the verge of death, sustained only by the continuous use of healing magic. There were no signs of him getting better either. He woke up every now and then, but always in a daze. He still looked as if he was in constant pain. It hurt my heart to see him like that, but since I couldn’t use healing magic, there was nothing I could do.

“Sister, it’s about time to switch,” I said.

“Mm, thanks, Rose,” Lily replied, smiling at me as she continued healing our master. She looked tired. The glimmer of magic in her hands was fading.

“It’s only for a little while, but please get some rest,” I said.

“Yeah, I’ll do that. I’ll leave things here to you.”

Lily staggered out of the manamobile. The most efficient way for her to regain her mana was to revert to a slime and get some rest. My sister’s original form was rather large, so she had to go outside to do so. While she did, I took over as our master’s guard. I couldn’t take on her other role of treating our master, though. I walked over to Mana, who was curled up in the corner of the vehicle, and shook her by the shoulder.

“Please wake up, Mana.”

“Fwaaah... Hm? Wose...?”

It was rare to see Mana half-asleep like this, but she was also exhausted. The only ones who could perform healing magic were Lily, Kei, and Mana. Kei was also sleeping in here like a corpse; she’d used up all her mana and needed time to recuperate.

Mana had been asleep for the same reason. The burden on them was immense, but we had no choice but to leave our master’s treatment to these three. Under better circumstances, we would’ve had more leeway, but with the provincial army’s attack, we had to resort to doing this on the move. What’s more, Mana’s body was far weaker than the other two’s, and she didn’t have much mana either. This must’ve weighed exceedingly on her.

“Sorry, Mana. I’m sure this is hard on you, but it’s time.”

“Aah... That’s right. Sorry.”

Mana massaged her brow, probably pushing back a headache. She tried to stand up, but she staggered, and I immediately supported her by the shoulders.

“Thank you,” she said.

“You’re welcome.”

Her shoulders were so slender. With just a little strength, I could crush them in my grip. Nevertheless, we had no choice but to depend on her now.

Mana took a seat by my master’s side, and the white light of healing magic took shape in her hands. Just then...

“Katou... And Rose?” a hoarse voice uttered.

My hands still on Mana's shoulders, I unintentionally pulled her into a hug. My master had faintly opened his eyes.

"M-Master! You're awake!"

"Yeah..." he answered.

I exchanged looks with Mana. He'd woken up multiple times while we were on the move, but this was the first time his consciousness was so clear.

"I was...with Travis... Was that...a dream? No, not a dream... That was..." he muttered incoherently, then attempted to sit up.

"Y-You mustn't, Master. Please don't be unreasonable," I begged in a fluster.

I held him down, not that I had to, though. My master wasn't able to lift his upper body. I could feel how little strength he had just through my hands. It was heart-wrenching. The poison Edgar had used—Holy Water—was still worming its way through my master's body. On the other hand, the strength in his eyes remained as strong as ever.

I held him up in my arms and had him drink some water.

"Sorry... Can you tell me what's going on...?" he asked. "Where is this...? What happened...? What's the situation...?"

"Do you remember Edgar attacking you?" I asked. "Because of the relic of salvation he used, one called Holy Water, you collapsed."

Mana was better off concentrating on her healing magic, so I had to answer my master's questions.

"Holy Water...?" he asked.

"According to legend, it's a magic tool that is activated by charging it with a knight's prayers...with a knight's life. They also call it the Martyr's Arrow."

"I see. The poison of a savior, then. That's why I collapsed..."

Even speaking looked painful for him, but his mind was functioning properly. He nodded in understanding.

"After you lost consciousness, we left the village," I said. "Right now, we're heading north through the Woodlands. We were informed that the Maclaurin

Provincial Army was closing in on us. Adolf, the Akerian soldier stationed in Diospyro, brought us the news. Claiming that you are the fake savior, the provincial army is here to subjugate you. They number some five thousand soldiers. Gerbera has already checked on their formation and said we would be helpless in a head-on confrontation.”

“The Maclaurin Provincial Army...?”

“Yes. In all likelihood, Edgar carried out his surprise attack in coordination with them. At first, we thought we could fix the misunderstanding that you are the fake savior, but we gave up on the idea after Berta came to the village. We learned that it would be meaningless to try.”

“Berta’s here...? No, never mind. We can leave that for later. More importantly, why is it meaningless?”

“By the time we received the news from Adolf, the provincial army had closed in far more than anyone imagined. To be specific, they’d made it all the way to Rapha.”

“That close...?”

My master’s expression darkened. He likely had a bad feeling about all this. He was right too.

“Yes. Unfortunately, the provincial army attacked and destroyed Rapha. According to the testimony of the elves who escaped, there was no room for discussion. There was no convincing them, so we trusted Berta’s assessment and ran away from the village.”

“No way, that’s absurd... Are you saying Rapha was attacked because of me?” my master asked in shock.

I shook my head. “No. It isn’t your fault, Master. Leah, Helena, and all the elves of Rapha believe that it’s nothing more than a convenient excuse. Truth be told, one of the men who attacked the village apparently said, ‘Annihilate these wicked elves.’”

“So they regard the elves as spiritualists...or rather, monster tamers, and thus traitors to humanity?”

“That’s how it appears.”

Historically, Aker had never harbored any amity for the Margraviate of Maclaurin to begin with, so the elves were all burning with hatred. Mana had hypothesized that one of the reasons our flight from the village was holding together was that the elves’ resentment spurred them on. The Maclaurin Provincial Army’s unreasonable hostility hardened the already-firm bonds between them. When many people moved as one, they exhibited outstanding strength, and in our current predicament, I was grateful for anything that helped.

“One small mercy is that the chief, Melvin, is still alive,” I continued. “After he got most of the elves out of Rapha, Melvin led a force of fighters and resisted the provincial army. Around the time the entire village was done for, Berta intervened and saved his life. He’s badly injured, but it’s not fatal.”

“I see. That’s good. I’ll have to thank her.”

“Yes. Berta has been guarding us ever since. She also brought a letter from Kudou Riku.”

“A letter...?” my master asked.

“Allow me to explain that part,” Mana said. “Sorry. It was addressed to you, Senpai, but seeing as this is an emergency, Lily and I read it already.”

“I don’t mind. What did it say?”

“Kudou Riku has accepted your proposal to keep in contact, and he entrusted Berta with the letter to exchange some information—the true identity of the fake savior. According to him, the fake savior rumored to be in the southern Empire was actually multiple former exploration team members. He omitted the details, but apparently, the cheaters failed to suppress monsters in the region, and what followed was interpreted as the deeds of a fake.”

“I see...” My master grimaced. He had something to say about it, but he decided there were more important matters at hand.

“Since real visitors are being treated as fakes, he wrote that it’s possible we’ll be mistaken for the fake savior too,” Mana explained. “He only gave this as a warning if we were to visit the Empire again, though. It doesn’t seem he

predicted that you'd be treated as a fake all the way in Aker."

"Well, yeah. All of this is absurd."

"It really is," Mana said with a nod, her brow creasing. "Even taking that into consideration, this is a little too excessive."

"Mana?" I prompted, confused by her statement.

"No, it's nothing..." Mana shook her head. "Rose, please continue."

"Ah, yes. Very well." Something was obviously on her mind, but right now we needed to explain things first. "Where were we? Right, we ran away from the village with the elves. That was three days ago."

"Three days..." My master's eyes widened slightly. "I'm surprised they haven't caught up."

"Mana has taken steps to prevent that."

"How so?"

"To put it simply, it's a diversion tactic. While we departed the village, before the provincial army arrived, Gerbera and Ayame acted on their own. Gerbera captured monsters in the vicinity and gathered them in the village, while Ayame kept an eye on how close the provincial army had gotten."

Gerbera was able to capture monsters in the wild only because of her outstanding strength, her independent combat skills, and her special talent of restraining others with her threads. And since Lily couldn't leave our master's side, Ayame's small size and her ability to sniff out the enemy were indispensable.

"After that, we determined when the provincial army would attack, then let the monsters loose."

"Meaning the monsters and the provincial army ended up clashing," my master said with an impressed sigh. "Not only does that slow them down, it doesn't wear out our own forces. I'd expect nothing less of you, Katou. You really are reliable."

"She truly is. Her mercilessness is so wonderful," I gushed.

“I know you’re praising me, but I have mixed feelings when you express it that way...” Mana said, her shoulders drooping.

Her work was worthy of praise. Mana hadn’t come up with this plan on the spot. She’d considered it before—even before the provincial army had arrived—just in case we came under attack. She’d hypothesized that the Holy Order would strike and had selected one of the pertinent plans.

Incidentally, one of the other plans was to slip past the burrows of the currently breeding azure hares, thereby forcing their colossal numbers to battle against our pursuers, but we’d given up on that one. We could have done it on our own, but with the village elves accompanying us, it was far too risky. It was unfortunate, but right now, the best we could do was pour all our efforts into what was possible.

“The provincial army wasted a bunch of time fighting the monsters in the village,” I continued. “And thanks to Berta warning us about the provincial army, we managed to leave rather quickly, so we’ve gotten a fair distance away from them.”

“That’s good. You’ve done so well,” my master said, then frowned with concern. “But what’re we going to do from here? We can’t just keep running away forever, right? Do we have somewhere to go? Hang on. You said we’re headed north?”

He realized our intent in the middle of asking the question. He narrowed his eyes, and I nodded.

“So you noticed. Yes. There is only one method of getting away,” I confirmed.

We hadn’t been running away blindly; we had a destination in mind. Lobivia had been the one to suggest it. Normally, she wouldn’t have mentioned this place, but in this one case, it was pretty much inevitable. It was the first place that came to her mind, after all.

“The Dark Woods in northern Aker,” I said. “To be specific, our destination is the Mist Barrier that surrounds the region.”

“I get it. You really thought this through. That mist has a magic effect that makes those who wander inside it get lost. An army can’t keep up their logistics

in there. Besides, even if they manage to stay organized, it'll be tough to track someone on the run. We even have Lobivia with us too."

"Precisely. Only dragons are exempt from the mist's effects. If we venture within, I doubt the provincial army can catch us."

"If we can get that far, there's hope. How long until we reach the Mist Barrier?"

"Two days if we hurry. It'll be a little reckless, but we should arrive around noon the day after tomorrow. At this rate, we'll likely get there before the provincial army catches up."

If pushed to say it, it was more important that we didn't end up with any stragglers. We couldn't afford to be negligent, of course, but things weren't utterly hopeless. My master understood this and let out a deep sigh of relief.

"I see, that's good to hear."

His eyes then closed a few times. His focus was oddly off. His fatigue had caught up to him due to the relief.

"You must be tired," I said. "Please don't push yourself."

He'd only been awake for a short time, but his body was being violated by poison, and his stamina was essentially nonexistent. There were other things I wanted to talk with him about regarding our current dilemma, and it would've been nice for him to speak with the others, but there was no helping it. It was best for us to wait until the next opportunity.

"Please don't worry, Master. Things will change if we can buy time in the Mist Barrier," I said, wanting to make sure he could sleep at ease. "Aker's army is unable to move at the moment, but they will soon hear about the events at the reclamation village. Shiran expects Aker won't stand for the unreasonable massacre of their citizens. Even if they can't actively go on the offensive because of the Holy Order's presence, it's highly probable they'll make a move to shelter us."

If not, we could also work out a plan once we were in the Mist Barrier. We could still overcome this.

“Please get some sleep. You may leave the rest to us.”

“Got it...” In the next instant, he began dozing off, but he continued speaking indistinctly. “Once I sleep...I’ll have to...fight again...”

“Master?”

I didn’t really understand, but there was no time to ask for clarification. My master was already more than halfway asleep.

“Hey, Rose... Could you hold my hand...? Just for a bit...” he said in a delirium, his eyes fully shut.

They said a weakened body weakened the heart, so he was probably anxious. Or maybe he didn’t have a reason. In any case, I wouldn’t refuse such a request.

“Very well.”

I touched my master’s hand, which was a fair bit larger than mine, and he grasped my fingers. He intertwined his fingers with mine, making sure to connect our palms. I hesitated a little, but returned his grip.

Despite the circumstances, my heart was joyful. I was just happy to be desired. I was aware of an immense urge building up inside me, but I still didn’t know what that feeling was, so the urge had nowhere to go. My entire body trembled for a brief instant from this bewilderingly strong and primitive emotion.

As it passed, another urge overcame me, but this time, I knew what it was. I had an intense desire to protect him. I was my master’s shield. That was my *raison d’être*.

“Master...”

It vexed me that I hadn’t been able to protect him from the Battle Ogre’s surprise attack despite being right by his side. I was disappointed with myself. My desire to keep him safe made me recall all our days together until now. I recalled this feeling I had for my master, one that I still couldn’t name.

Seeing my master so exhausted, a vortex of different emotions swirled together, driving me to one simple conclusion.

“No matter what it costs, I will protect you, Master.”

Chapter 3: The Battle in the World of Light

I opened my eyes, and the world of light spread out before me. I floated, my body now a glowing flame within the eternal darkness. This flame was my projection, and I could see my own figure. I'd come to this mysterious space before; it was a place only my servants and I existed in. However, a rotten scent lingered in the air now. It was something Edgar's attack had brought in by using Holy Water. It was an unbearable, vomit-inducing stench.

"Welcome back, Majima Takahiro. Welcome to the world of nightmares."

A face appeared from the depths of darkness. It was Travis Mortimer, the commander of the group that had attacked Kehdo, the Holy Order's Fourth Company. He looked horrible. A deep laceration ran across both his eyes, and the contour of his face looked as if it was melting. He used to have graceful features, but they only highlighted how repulsive he was now. His hand, looking like some poorly made clay sculpture, grabbed my wrist. The force behind it was dreadful, and my wrist creaked and cracked with an awful noise.

"Guh..."

I felt my hairs stand on end. This was the sensation of my very core being threatened. Seeing me grimace, Travis's melted lips twisted. He was smiling, malice oozing from his face.

"How does it feel to have your soul violated?"

Was this projection of myself what I was when reduced only to my soul? Judging by Travis's hate-filled words, my very soul was under attack. Travis's superpower, the Holy Gaze, the one he'd inherited as a descendant of a savior, didn't have the capability to do this. Therefore, this was the work of the Holy Water Rose had spoken of. With this, I had a fair grasp of the situation.

I sighed, then asked, "Travis, why are you here?"

"Is it strange for me to be here?" he asked in turn, his melted face contorting in glee. "Are you curious why I'm tormenting you?"

He looked as if he was having so much fun watching me suffer. His emotions were far more repulsive than his appearance.

“Does it hurt? Do you suffer? Do you feel misery?” he continued, arrogant and overbearing. “Heh. Heh heh. Serves you right, you—”

“Don’t jump to conclusions and act all pleased with yourself. It’s pathetic,” I said, cutting him off.

Travis’s sneer stiffened. He hadn’t expected me to retaliate. Not that I had a reason to pay him any attention to begin with.

“Don’t misunderstand,” I countered. “I asked why you’re here. If I’m no more than a soul in this place, then so are you, so why are you in such a pitiful state?”

Now that I knew what was going on, it wasn’t all that hard to predict what had happened.

“Holy Water, a relic from a past savior...or the Martyr’s Arrow, was it?” I said. “Seems that it’s a special magic weapon activated by a knight’s prayer—by sacrificing their life to it. If you’re here, then that’s why. But in that case, there’s one strange detail. I doubt anything would’ve made you give up your own life.”

I hadn’t known him for long, but I could at least tell that Travis was entirely disconnected from the concept of self-sacrifice, so the reason he was here despite that fact meant...

“You had your soul ripped out of your body, didn’t you?”

Naturally, I had no idea about the particulars. It probably had something to do with his damaged eyes—something that had happened outside his battle against us. I didn’t know if this was actually related, but I was certain of one thing: this man, who used human life with abandon for the sake of furthering his own career, had met his end being used by others.

“Aaaah! You bastard!” Travis roared, confirming that I was pretty much on the mark. Rage dominated his features as if he were going to try and bite me to death. “You bastard! It’s all your fucking fault! Because of you, I... Aaaaaah!”

It turned out that this situation we were in wasn’t his intent. Having said that, it was unreasonable to pin the blame on me.

“My fault? Don’t be stupid.”

Travis was the one who’d attacked Shiran’s hometown for selfish reasons. He’d been driven away, and this was the result. He deserved everything he got. It was preposterous to try and shift the blame. There was no point humoring him, so...

“Wh-What?!” Travis exclaimed. He’d been gripping my wrist like a vise, pulling himself toward me, and I’d pushed him back ever so slightly. “Y-You bastard! How?!”

“It’s not all that crazy,” I said. I felt a terrible burden on me, but I didn’t let it show as I scoffed at him. “Holy Water converts a knight’s prayer into power, but from the looks of it, any type of desire manifests its effect. For example, it even works with your hateful grudge. A relic from a past savior that transforms willpower into a poisoned blade—that’s the true nature of Holy Water.”

The stronger the soul charging the weapon, the longer the poison could last. The more willpower a soul possessed, the more potent the poison. On that point, the person who’d chosen Travis as a sacrifice understood him well.

Travis was a carnivore, readily trampling tens, even hundreds of lives just to nourish himself. Setting aside questions of morality, he definitely had exceptional willpower. What’s more, he’d suffered a counterblow from me, bringing him to ruin. His resentment and wrath were off the charts, and those negative emotions were the source of this Holy Water’s power.

In all likelihood, this use of Holy Water had an unprecedentedly nasty effect. Its target couldn’t endure through sheer determination—normally, that is.

“A savior’s power that affects the soul combined with a wicked soul that readily crushes all in its path. It’s true, the Travis brand of Holy Water is a fiendish poison. However...” I paused, glaring right at Travis. “It’s a different matter if I have something that can deal with it.”

“What the hell are you going on about...?”

“My soul transforms as my ability develops. Shiran pointed this out to me. To put it another way, my ability also affects the soul.”

This malicious Holy Water should’ve wormed through its target without

opposition, but I could see and interact with Travis here because this world of light was created by my ability, one that affected the soul.

“A-And what of it?!” Travis yelled, his expression convulsing. “Do you think that’s enough to defeat me?!”

The pressure he exerted strengthened. The balance of power tipped in his favor again. The burden on my soul intensified, and the pain multiplied. But I was still fine. In other words, I was forcing Travis to exhaust himself. Unlike me, he was outside his physical body. Once his soul was depleted, that was it. I was okay, but it also wasn’t over yet.

“Hah... Ha ha... Ha ha ha ha! You shocked me a little, but in the end, this is all you amount to,” Travis’s vengeful apparition said scornfully, believing he’d regained the upper hand. “You cannot defeat me!”

“Yeah. You’re right. I know my limits,” I said. He wasn’t wrong. “This is as far as my strength goes.”

I didn’t need him to tell me that. I’d been aware of the limits of my own strength for a long time, so I couldn’t deny his words.

“But so what?” I added defiantly.

“Wha—?!”

“That doesn’t matter at all,” I declared with ease. “Sorry, this power of mine doesn’t exist so that I can fight on my own.”

“It’s just as you say, my dear,” a calm voice joined in, resonating in the darkness.

In the next instant, white mist filled the world of light.

“What the hell?!”

Travis couldn’t have expected this. He panicked, and before he could grasp what was going on, the thin mist twisted into a vortex and transformed into countless vines. The vines stretched in every direction and bound Travis’s body in an instant.

“Wh-What is this?!”

“Well done,” I said, drawing a hateful look from the dumbfounded Travis.

“It can’t be... Is this one of your detestable servants...?”

I nodded. “Yeah, that’s right. Salvia and Asarina. The two of them are one with me, so this Holy Water is devouring them too. That’s also why when I push back, I can borrow their strength.”

If he was close enough for me to strike, then it only made sense for me to do so. This was our world in the first place. To counteract a past savior’s relic, Salvia and Asarina had chosen to combine their powers, creating the vines that bound Travis.

“Salvia, Asarina, please lend me your strength.”

“Of course, my dear.”

“Sssster!”

The two of them answered my call, as reliable as ever.



“Get away from our master!”

“Ssster!”

They started pouring strength into the vines to tear Travis away from me. At the same time, I struggled with everything I had.

“Get off me and go to hell, Travis!”

I mustered every last ounce of power in me. I gritted my teeth and withstood the pain. My conversation with Rose came to mind. In the real world, they were desperately doing everything they could, so I had to fight to my very limit.

“This is our world! Get out!” I roared, turning the tide and peeling Travis’s hand off me ever so slightly.

“You can do it, my dear!”

“Ssster!”

Travis’s essence shook, and he started detaching from the world of light. With just a little more, we could—

“Heh. Heh heh heh...”

Just then, a laugh echoed around us.

“Heh. Heh heh. Heh heh heh heh.”

Travis was laughing. It sounded so repulsive. I should’ve ignored him, but I wondered why he was doing it. An ominous foreboding hung over me.

“What’s so funny?” I asked.

“Oh, nothing. I just didn’t think it’d end up like this,” Travis answered with curious tranquility. He’d regained his composure despite being seconds away from being expelled. “I see how you’ve managed to overcome the many crises that have befallen you... But is this truly all right?”

I had no idea why he was acting so calm.

“While you focus within yourself, you may just lose something you can never recover,” he said mockingly.

“What are you...?”

In the middle of speaking, I realized what he was getting at. Or rather, something conveyed it to me. The darkness shook.

“This is...”

I could sense this anywhere. I didn’t need to be in this special world to do so. We were all connected, after all.

“Everyone...?”

The shaking was my servants’ agitation passing to me through the mental path.

Chapter 4: Defensive Battle on the Run *Rose's POV*

“Enemies! They’re getting close!”

It was just before evening when Leah warned us of the danger her spirit had detected. Some time had passed since I’d spoken with my master. Lily had finished her break and switched with me as his guard, while I’d gone back out to walk with the elves.

“An attack! From above!” Leah screamed just as the enemy’s assault came down on us. They were still a fair distance away, but they’d launched a long-distance strike, using bows to shoot at the elves from one side of the path through the forest. The arcing arrows fell directly above the elves like falling rain.

“Those curs! An ambush?!”

“Like I’ll let you!”

Gerbera and Berta sprung into action just in time. Threads and tentacles flew about in the air to obstruct the arrows, and a beat later, panicked screams came from the crowd of elves. Due to my proximity, I moved to protect the vehicle my master and Mana were in, swinging my axe and swatting arrows from the sky. Panic spread through the area shortly after, and the elves started scattering like ants, looking for a safe place to take shelter. However, right before they could get anywhere, Shiran shouted at them.

“Calm down!”

There was so much strength in her voice that the elves froze as if they’d been slapped.

“Everyone! Gather in one place!”

It was hard to protect a scattered group, especially when only a few people were capable of fighting. Shiran’s judgment was quick and precise, an indication of her experience as a former lieutenant of the Alliance Knights. Unfortunately, the elves didn’t have the wits and the nimbleness to carry out her orders.

Not that anyone blamed them for this. They were simple villagers, not knights. They weren't even soldiers. Running away from their homes was already a tremendous mental burden, and they were panicking from the sudden ambush. What's more, the enemy was fast. By the time the elves finally reacted, the second volley was inbound. And this time, it was accompanied by magic.

Thanks to Shiran, the elves hadn't dispersed, but the group was still a little spread out. Not even Gerbera and Berta could protect them all, and more screams rose all over.

"What's going on?!" Gerbera yelled.

After unleashing her threads, she smashed a fireball with her leg. Either a very capable mage had unleashed it, or they'd used some magic tool, because Gerbera's white leg hair flew loose, and she lost her balance.

"Ugh! Did they actually overtake us?!"

"That can't be!" Shiran shouted. "A five-thousand-man army can only move so fast. We weren't particularly fast ourselves, but they still shouldn't have caught up yet!"

"But we're under attack!"

"This is no time to complain! The next attack is coming!" Berta said with a growl.

Another volley came mercilessly at them. They somehow managed to withstand it, but more elves were injured, and more cries of agony rose among them.

"Fuck! Get off your goddamn high horse!" Lobivia shouted from the front of the line, where she'd been protecting the elves. She took off her sash, and her tiny body swelled and turned into a dragon. "Graaaawr!"

She roared and charged toward the soaring arrows, making sure to protect her broken arm. She likely thought it would be better to go on the offensive before we took more damage, which wasn't bad for a decision made in the heat of the moment.

However, at that same moment, Shiran turned around. Having abundant experience fighting in large formations, her focus always covered a wide area, and because of that, she was the first to notice.

“From the opposite side!” she yelled.

A moment later, a volley of arrows came from the opposite direction of the previous attack.

“They split into two groups?!”

“Grrrrr!”

Gerbera and Berta leaped over the elves to the other side, barely fending off the arrows.

“Graaaah!”

Ayame added her efforts to the defense, intercepting some arrows with her fireballs.

Realizing things had gotten serious behind her, Lobivia turned around in a panic, but as she tried to return, arrows and magic rained down on her back.

“Gaaah?!”

Because she’d been focused on attacking, Lobivia lost her footing and tumbled. She yelped in pain, and perhaps because the blow was fairly serious, she didn’t immediately get back up. As that happened, arrows came down from both sides on the elves.

“I’ll lend a hand!” Lily yelled, charging out of the manamobile. “Hyaaaah!”

Her spear in one hand, she nimbly ran about and struck down arrows one after the other. It was impressive, but her expression was tense. It would’ve been more efficient for her to use wind magic rather than her spear. Deployed over a wide area, wind magic could block both incoming arrows and magic, but she was probably avoiding this option because she was anxious about her mana capacity.

It took Lily everything she had just to keep things from deteriorating. Right now, we had no choice but to do what we were capable of. Kei also jumped out of the manamobile, a sword in hand to help defend everyone. Even Shiran, who

was suffering from severe mana deficiency, had her sword at the ready. We pushed ourselves to our limits just to defend the elves.

Still, even with all our efforts, our defense was inadequate. Had all the elves gathered in one place, had they done as Shiran had ordered right away, it would have been a different story, but as things were now, there was too much ground to cover and too few of us to cover it. Besides, we couldn't expect such adaptability from simple villagers. Several of the elves were injured at this point too, so that made it even harder to get them to follow directions. Had we wanted to do something, we would have had to do it before things got this bad.

Normally, our group could've handled this a little better, but we were lacking many things right now. Our master, our emotional pillar, was absent. Mana, whose wisdom was indispensable, was healing our master, so she couldn't leave his side. And Lily, our eldest sister and one of our strongest fighters, was late in joining the fray.

Things were steadily slipping away from us due to these missing gears. At this rate, we would be defeated before we could accomplish anything.

"If only we could rally somehow!" I yelled.

I already knew we couldn't; everyone had their hands full. We just didn't have the means to break out of this. I couldn't do anything more than protect the manamobile our master was in. Thoughts ran desperately through my mind as I swung my axe around, but there was no way some genius plan would conveniently manifest. The word "annihilation" came to mind, and hopeless thoughts started flooding my heart.

This is no good. I can't let this go on. I have to do something... And in the next instant, my racing thoughts froze.

"Huh...?"

I should've been the first to notice, but a figure staggered out of the manamobile I'd been protecting.

"Y-You can't! Senpai!"

It was my master. Mana was by his side trying to stop him. She had to. His face was so pale and haggard, and he was clearly in no shape to stand, let alone

walk. It was too dangerous for him to be outside with all these arrows flying around, but that wasn't even the main issue. He was unsteady, and it wouldn't be surprising if he collapsed at any moment. Nevertheless, his expression remained resolute. His was the face of someone who knew what he had to do.

"What he had to do"? What was that, exactly?

Once I thought of that, a shock ran through my heart, one strong enough to shatter my wooden body.

What my master wanted had always been the same. He wanted to protect everyone dear to him. He never wanted everything to spill from his hands again. It was a beautiful wish that would never falter, and it was why my master held out his hand without hesitation.

"Misty Lodge."

He used the one means that would get us out of this situation. Mist flooded the area with explosive force, covering the entire region.

With visibility hampered, everyone's options were suddenly limited. That didn't apply to us, though. I didn't see the world through regular sight to begin with, but even the others received information from our master and Salvia's Misty Lodge through the mental path, so this didn't hinder us from maintaining a defensive formation.

The other huge benefit from this was that the magic mist also enveloped the enemy. We could tell they had two units of about a hundred soldiers stationed to the left and right of the path. We'd thought that the army couldn't have caught up to us, and it turned out the main force hadn't done so yet. Therefore, we could still get out of this.

"Ayame! Lobivia! Do it now!" our master yelled.

If we knew where the enemy was, we could counterattack. Ayame spat her fireballs at one unit while Lobivia got up and breathed flames at the other. They were some distance away, but we still heard screams.

As that was happening, the enemy kept sporadically attacking us. Nonetheless, it was now limited enough that we could handle it. The tables had turned, and we'd managed to retaliate against our ambushers. At this rate, we

could even deal them a major blow. Our enemy was prudent, however.

“They’re retreating?!”

They’d judged they would suffer great losses if they continued. This was technically a chance for us to chase them down and defeat them, but we didn’t have the strength for that. Some of the elves were wounded, so we had to pull back as quickly as possible. If not, we would be right back where we started if the enemy launched another attack.

Besides, the magic mist, which had given us the advantage, could only be maintained for a few seconds when deployed at this density. The position of our retreating enemies was already getting vague. We had an even larger problem to consider too.

“It worked out...somehow...” my master muttered as the mist rapidly dispersed.

Ghostly pale, he had to lean on Mana to stay on his feet. His shoulders heaved as if he’d been running at full speed. Even though it’d only been for a few scant seconds, it was unbelievable that he’d managed to use any magic in that state.

“Master!”

I was about to run to his side, but before I could, he started tipping over.

“Hurry and rally...before the enemy...comes again...”

With those last orders, he fell unconscious and collapsed on the spot.

Chapter 5: Flight's End *Rose's POV*

Thanks to our master's intervention, we just barely pulled through this crisis. We didn't have time to feel relieved, though. We had to continue running from the Maclaurin Provincial Army; our goal hadn't changed.

After taking a short break, Shiran uttered in a tired voice, "The wounded are an issue..."

We'd had to treat the wounded first. It would also be difficult for them to travel with their injuries hampering them, so we'd had to slow down. Sadly, that wasn't even the only problem.

"All these stupid little attacks are way worse than that," Lobivia murmured, her body covered in bandages.

Just as she said, the pursuit force had attacked us several times since then. We'd been prepared, of course, so we'd fended them off properly every time and hadn't suffered any more casualties among the elves. On the other hand, we hadn't been able to deal any significant damage to the enemy. Their pursuit force was likely composed of the elite, those capable of acting independently of the main army. We couldn't shake the feeling that the Holy Order was lending a hand in this effort.

What's more, they only ever targeted the elves and never pushed too far. The group of elves made for a large target, so it was relatively easy to attack them from afar. The pursuit force never drew close, though; they just repeated what basically summed up to harassment. Even when we tried to counterattack, they were split in two, so the other unit would close in from the opposite direction to threaten the elves.

"Fuck! They're such a pain!" Lobivia grumbled, ruffling her red hair. "I could crush them if they just came at us head-on!"

"Kuu..." Ayame whined weakly in agreement.

"The enemy's acting in a way to make sure that doesn't happen," Gerbera

said, shaking her head slowly.

She looked fed up with this too. They could attack whenever they wanted, while we had to keep on guard at all times. It exhausted us greatly. Even Gerbera, who was unaccustomed to protecting so many people at once, was at a loss about these attacks that had hounded us for over a day, so the mental burden on the elves had to be immeasurable.

“Their goal is clearly to stall us,” Berta groaned. “We’ve already lost half a day. It wouldn’t be surprising if the enemy’s main force catches up to us before the day ends. If they reach us before we get to the Mist Barrier, it’ll all be over.”

I didn’t want to accept this, but I couldn’t deny it either. If the provincial army caught up to us, it would be impossible for us to protect the elves and our master. Everyone knew this, hence our gloomy expressions. The mood in the air was disheartening.

“In any case, all we can do is work together and try our best,” I said, gathering the eyes of everyone around me. “It’s just a little farther to the Mist Barrier’s edge. If we can make it that far, it’ll work out one way or another.”

When we all acted depressed, the air around us only got darker and darker. That would make it harder for us to do the things that we were normally capable of. It was important to properly assess our situation, but we had to keep focused on the light at the end of the tunnel, just as our master did.

Fortunately, I couldn’t feel fatigue. Any damage I suffered in battle could be remedied by swapping out parts. There was no burden on my body, so I had it relatively easy. Thus, it was my role to encourage the others.

“Let’s think about what we should do next,” I suggested.

“You’re right,” Shiran said, understanding my intent and jumping aboard. “Now that it’s come to this, there’s no helping it. Let’s push all the way to our destination without any breaks.”

“All at once?” I asked, somewhat shocked by her suggestion.

“Yes. If we only need to reach the Mist Barrier, then everyone’s stamina should hold out. The villagers will probably use up all the energy they have left, but even if they have any to spare, it won’t help us if the army catches us.”

“I see...”

She had a point, but there was a problem with this plan.

“But Shiran, in that case, once we reach the Mist Barrier, the elves will be too exhausted to move anymore,” I said, pointing out the flaw. “If we don’t go far enough in, I’m pretty sure they’ll still catch us.”

“That’s true. It’s very likely they will,” Shiran said. “But in the Mist Barrier, we’ll be able to take the initiative.”

“Ooh!” Gerbera exclaimed. “You mean we can counterattack?” Her dark expression was suddenly brimming with light.

“Yes,” Shiran answered. “If they’re going to catch us either way, we’ll have better odds in the Mist Barrier.”

“Hmm. I see. Not bad. Not bad at all,” Gerbera said with a fearless smile.

Gerbera was sure to have quite a lot of pent-up resentment. She welcomed a proper fight.

After thinking it over a bit, I also agreed. “True, inside the Mist Barrier, the pursuit force won’t be able to launch long-distance attacks on us as they have been. That way, we won’t need as many of us to protect the elves. There’s still a risk, but considering the likelihood of being overrun by the army, we’ll have a chance this way.”

In the end, we were simply delaying when they caught up to us, but this way, that delay was meaningful.

“When that time comes, we can rely on Lobivia, seeing as how she can move inside the barrier freely,” I added in understanding.

“That’s the idea,” Shiran confirmed as we both looked at the little dragon.

“Mm. I know the insides of the Mist Barrier,” Lobivia said, her lips pulled tight.

Last time, Kath had brought us all the way to Draconia. This time, we would be relying on Lobivia to guide us through the dense fog. The Mist Barrier had a similar effect to our master’s Misty Lodge, but its benefits were restricted to dragons.

“We’ll be relying on you when that time comes,” Shiran said.

“Got it,” Lobivia growled.

She had plenty of fighting spirit left, and it wasn’t just her either. Everyone’s expressions had brightened. The idea of a counterattack had been very effective at restoring morale.

“However,” Shiran continued after seeing everyone’s reaction, “now that we’ve come this far, the enemy has likely guessed what we intend to do. Even if they don’t know that we can move freely within the Mist Barrier, they at least recognize how troublesome it’ll be if we make it there. We can expect even more attempts to hinder us. Please keep focused.”

Her words spoke to how severe things were, but nobody was disheartened.

“Very well. Let’s prove that we can protect everyone!” Gerbera said, clenching her fists.

“What we must do hasn’t changed,” Berta added calmly. “On the contrary, if they try to stop us more proactively, they may show an opening.”

“Hmph. It’s a pain when they pick at us from afar,” Lobivia joined in, hyping herself up. “If they mess up and step in too far, then I’ll chomp their heads off.”

“Kuuu!” Ayame yipped cheerfully.

We had the willpower, and at this rate, we would accomplish what we had to, so I fired myself back up to face the task at hand.



After that, we finished our short meeting and returned to our own jobs, but right before splitting up, Shiran called out to me.

“Thank you very much, Rose.”

“What for?” I asked as she walked over to me.

“The mood changed because of what you said. Thanks to that, we’ve restored morale.”

“I didn’t do much,” I replied, shaking my head. “Gather everyone together, settle their feelings, and decide on a plan. My master, Lily, and Mana have done

so until now, but none of them can move at the moment, so we must do something about it ourselves. All I did was poorly imitate them.”

I could only fight at close range, so there wasn’t much I could do in this situation. I actually felt guilty that trying to raise everyone’s spirits was all I could contribute.

“Even if it was just an imitation, it doesn’t take away the value of what you’ve accomplished,” Shiran said. “In truth, I think it was pretty impressive. Imitating Takahiro, Lily, and Mana is something only you could do in the first place, having been with them since the very beginning.”

“Is that so? It’d be nice if that were true.”

“It was a splendid feat, Rose.”

I didn’t really feel I had accomplished anything. Shiran looked tired, but the smile she gave me was full of strength. It was this aspect of her that had stopped the group from scattering in an instant. We were fortunate to have her with us.

“It’s just a little farther. Let’s give it our all,” she said.

“Yes,” I replied with a firm nod.



When last we’d come to the Dark Woods covering Aker’s northern border and the Mist Barrier that surrounded it, we’d gone through the relatively open lands of northern Aker. This time, we wanted to hinder the enemy army chasing us as much as possible, so we’d cut through the Woodlands covering western Aker.

Quite some time had passed since our short rest. The elves were getting more and more fatigued, starting with the children, who had very little stamina. Some could no longer walk, so they rode on a cart that Gerbera pulled instead.

It was about time we reached the Mist Barrier. We’d expected to come under attack, but until now, that hadn’t happened. That only increased the tension in the air.

“With the Mist Barrier right before us, there’s no reason for them to hold back...”

If they launched a long-distance attack on us, we'd have to stop. Now that we were this far, surely our enemy would disregard their own safety and do everything in their power to stall us, yet...

"Why aren't they attacking?" I asked.

"Perhaps they mistook our destination," Shiran said as she walked by my side.

As the one giving the elves instructions, Shiran had a far keener eye on our surroundings than everyone else. Lobivia and Berta protected the front of the group, while Gerbera and Ayame handled the back. Unsited to protecting a group, I guarded my master's manamobile while assisting Shiran.

"Or perhaps it means they've taken up a simple fortified position," Shiran added. "In that case, it would take time for them to get ready and lie in wait for us as close to the Mist Barrier as they could get."

"I see."

"Or maybe they set up a trap."

"A trap? Berta is watching the front, so I'm pretty sure she'll detect anything of the like. Either way, we should inform her of the possibility."

"Good idea. Can I ask you to tell her for me?"

After our conversation, I parted ways with Shiran and moved past the limping elves at the front of the line.

"What is it, puppet?" Berta asked.

"I have a message from Shiran."

I went on to tell her about what we'd discussed.

"Hmph. Very well. I'll keep an eye out."

Berta acted curt, but she was devoted to any task given to her. Besides, she was actually the type to care for others. After throwing the exhausted elves a glance, she turned back my way.

"We only have to hang on for a little while longer," she said. "Once we're past this forest, we'll be at the Mist Barrier, correct?"

"Yes. That's what I've heard. We should be coming upon the wetlands of the

Mist Barrier.”

“Hmm. Now that I think of it, the best time to attack us would be right as we come out of the forest.”

“Why is that?” I asked.

“Our fatigue has reached its peak. With our destination right before us, we’re likely to relax our guard. I doubt they’d let such weakness pass. Hmph. Well, the wind is in our favor. If any soldiers are lying in wait, I’ll be able to tell by their stench.”

“Please let us know.”

With my message passed, I returned to Shiran and informed her of what I’d discussed with Berta.

“I’ll go tell Gerbera too,” I offered.

Just like that, I went up and down the whole line. While I was at it, I checked that the elves who were out of Shiran’s sight were still there. No matter what the situation, we had to be prepared.

Time went on.

We kept going.

No attack came.

Were they really lying in wait ahead of us? We remained on edge the whole time, and then...

“Oooh!”

A cheer broke out at the head of the group.

“We’re out of the forest!”

We were starting to exit the forest, meaning we were at our destination. If the enemy was going to attack, now was the time. But Berta, who should’ve been on maximum alert at this point, gave no warning.

“No attacks and no ambush...?” I muttered in disbelief.

Was such a ridiculous thing even possible? With the Mist Barrier here, the

enemy had no reason to wait until we escaped into it, yet they were nowhere to be seen. The elves at the front steadily moved forward.

Had we overthought things? No attack came. Nothing happened that would make anyone scream. It was the definition of quiet—so very quiet.

Before I knew it, the cheering had stopped. No sound came from the elves who'd exited the forest. Something was wrong.

"What happened?"

I quickened my pace. The elves had come to a stop right outside the tree line. I caught up with them quickly, and after stepping past the trees, I came into the wetlands we'd visited before, just as expected. There was no sign of the pursuit force. No arrows came flying at us, and no magic assailed us. No soldiers waited for us in fortified positions. No traps blocked our way. There was nothing. A gentle slope of damp soil simply spread out before us—and that in itself was abnormal.

"Where's the Mist Barrier?" Lobivia mumbled in a daze.

Yes. No dense fog obscured our vision. Looking off into the distance, I could see a faint mist hanging over the area, but it was nothing like the Mist Barrier we knew of. We couldn't hide from our enemies in this, but even more important was the unexpected sight before us.

"There're...traces of it. This ain't the wrong place. This is where the Mist Barrier should be..." Lobivia mumbled, limply falling backward like a helpless child. "What...happened? These're really just traces. I can feel just a little of the magic, but this is like..."

Her normally unyielding expression was sorrowful, and her face was pale.

"L-Lobivia..."

I didn't know what to say to her. I didn't know what was happening, and I didn't know what we should do.

"This feeling is..." Lobivia suddenly began.

Her eyes shot wide open. I wondered what she was thinking, when in the next second, she ran off on her own.

“Lobivia! Wait!”

My voice didn’t reach her. Lobivia seemed so small in the distance already.

“I’ll bring her back! Keep an eye out here!”

We couldn’t let her go alone. That said, even if there were no signs of nearby enemies, we couldn’t all go after her and leave the elves on their own either.

I ran after her immediately. Lobivia was faster than me, but she was injured, so I managed to barely keep up with her.

“W-Wait! Lobivia!”

I called out to her over and over, but she didn’t appear to hear me, so all I could do was keep on her.

After a short while, Lobivia cried, “There!”

I followed her eyes and spotted someone collapsed facedown on the ground. It was a woman, her long red hair splayed across the damp soil. She wore similar clothes to Lobivia, but her arms were outside her sleeves, and her clothes were dyed with dark dried blood.

“Kath!” Lobivia screamed, running over to the woman and holding her up in her arms.

“Kath...?” I echoed.

She was one of Lobivia’s older sisters, the one who’d guided us to Draconia. I was confused by the mention of her name and ran up to join them. The woman was, without a doubt, Kath.

She had a large wound that had soaked her clothes in blood. The reason she wasn’t wearing her clothes properly was probably because she’d transformed into a dragon. I figured that, after fighting with something, she hadn’t had the time to put her clothes back on and had collapsed here.

How could I not be bewildered by what I was seeing? Kath was supposed to be in Draconia, hidden deep within the Mist Barrier. Why was she lying on the ground over here?

“Kath! Kath!” Lobivia cried with grief.

Hearing her voice, Kath's eyelids fluttered, then slowly opened.

"Lobivia...?" She looked up at her little sister's sad face. "Aah... It really is you. Thank goodness... I'm glad I got to see you again, Lobivia..."

She raised a trembling hand and stroked her little sister's cheek as if to make sure she was really there. Lobivia gripped her hand in return.

"Kath, what's with that wound?" she asked urgently. "What the hell happened?!"

"Right... There's something I must tell you."

Kath's voice was full of sorrow, and it had a ring of lament to it, as if the hands of time could never be turned back.

"Our settlement was attacked."

Chapter 6: The End of a Stagnated Time

The attack was sudden. Before anyone knew it, the Mist Barrier protecting Draconia had come undone. The fog that obstructed all sight and disoriented those who wandered in was indispensable for the dragons to hide themselves from the world, and now it was gone. This had never happened since the establishment of the settlement, so what could the dragons do but panic? The only ones who took action immediately were the few “guardians” of the settlement, including Rex. They tried to investigate what was going on, but they were met with an ambush.

There were intruders, and only three of them at that, but they were terrifyingly powerful. They blew the settlement to bits with a wide-area blast of magic. Not a single building remained standing, and several of the residents who didn’t get away in time fell victim to the attack.

When the magic came to a stop and the smoke cleared, the assailants showed themselves. Rex and the others transformed into dragons to meet them head-on. Dragons were much stronger than any regular monster, and even though several had already died, nearly twenty of them remained. They bared their fangs to crush the invaders who’d taken their siblings’ lives.

“Graaawr!”

The dragons unleashed their rage. Rex went on a rampage ahead of his siblings. They’d all inherited their mother’s distinctive feature—large carapaces covering their enormous bodies—so a regular monster’s attack wouldn’t even faze them.

Among the dragons, Rex was particularly large. His siblings were on average about ten meters from head to tail, whereas his dragon body was well over twenty meters long. His carapace was as thick as a human was tall, completely resistant to any half-hearted attack. That was supposed to be the case, but Rex’s enemies were strong enough to surpass the defensive power he and his siblings possessed.

“Ooooh!”

One of the enemies let out a war cry and struck Rex with a hammer, shaking his gigantic frame and bringing him to a stop.

“You’re mine!”

A sword came in next, gouging into his flesh where his carapace didn’t protect him.

“G-Graaaah!”

“Hup! Close one.”

Rex retaliated, but to no avail. His claws, boasting extraordinary destructive force, hit nothing but air. His fiery breath was blocked by magic.

[Rex!] Ella screamed, seeing her little brother struggling in battle.

[Get outta here, Ella!] Rex roared back at her. [Gah! You pesky humans!]

He cursed at the humans before him, but they couldn’t understand. In his dragon form, he couldn’t speak the human tongue. Regardless, in this case, they probably wouldn’t have understood had he been in human form either.

“Man, this one’s sturdy,” a young boy with black hair muttered, resting the handle of his huge hammer on his shoulder.

The one who’d cut Rex with a sword was also a boy. Neither looked particularly used to fighting, but the abundance of mana in their bodies was far from normal. Their power was beyond comprehension. They surely had enough strength to save this world.

[Fuck! These guys really are visitors!]

Rex groaned, despair in his voice, as he figured out his enemies’ identities. He’d correctly assessed the situation, after all. Draconia’s residents possessed significant strength, but the entire settlement couldn’t mobilize at a moment’s notice. This sudden event had surpassed everything they’d prepared for.

Even if humans attacked the settlement, it would take time for them to get through the Mist Barrier, so that would give the dragons a buffer to run away. They’d never imagined that the barrier would suddenly be dispelled, which was

why they'd been forced to fight on the spot.

At first, with only three visitors against them, the dragons had the advantage. The enemies focused on defense, however, buying themselves some amount of time. After that, enemy reinforcements joined the fray. There were only ten new arrivals, but if all ten were visitors, the dragons had no chance of winning. Two giant dragon corpses already littered the ground.

[Ella! Kath! Take our sisters and run!] Rex screamed, using his claws to strike at one of the visitors who'd leaped at him.

"Oof?!" The boy blocked at the last moment, but he slammed back-first into the ground. He passed out, and one of his comrades retrieved him.

Even though Rex had made himself some space with that, there was no time to rest. He swung his tail at another enemy, and breathed fire at yet another.

[Leave the rest to us!] Rex roared as he held back the attackers. Following his lead, his wounded little brothers cried out, prepared to die.

[I-I can't—!]

[Kath!] Ella yelled, stopping Kath from objecting. [Let's split into two groups and run away.]

Ella let out a growl from deep within her throat, one clearly full of regret. She'd rebuked her little sister, but she felt the same on the inside. Kath knew this, so she ground her fangs.

[Grr! Fine! Fine! I know!] Kath yelled, turning her back on her older brothers.

With nearly half the dragons running away, the invaders obviously noticed.

"Hey! Those ones are running!"

"Don't let 'em get away! After 'em!"

[Like hell!] Rex shouted, standing to bar the visitors' path. [You won't pass!]

Rex hardened his resolve and showed no hesitation. He was the settlement's guardian, but he hadn't started out with the strength to protect anyone. He'd been a crybaby as a child, and he'd always clung to his reliable older brother, Thaddeus. Rex had changed the day their father, the former savior, died,

because their father had told the young dragons to protect their family.

All their older brothers had died with their father, so Rex believed that he and Thaddeus had to protect all of their siblings. Rex's obstinate nature was born of rectifying his originally timid personality, but had he not done so, he couldn't have become so strong. That was the reason Rex was who he was today.

He'd tempered both his mind and body and grown larger than everyone aside from his great mother, with a thick armor of carapace. All of it was for the sake of protecting his family. In truth, even though Rex had been the first to charge into the invaders, he'd endured to this point while covering his brothers from many attacks. It was due to his tremendous efforts that only two victims had fallen prey to the invaders so far.

[I'll make you regret ever stepping foot into our home, you damned humans!]

Rex ran amok, making full use of his huge body. He had no delusions of surviving, but he wasn't going to stand by and let these invaders go right through him. He had to buy every second he could for his family; that was why his strength existed. Rex, a carapace wyrm, wasn't going to die so easily.

If Rex hadn't been facing saviors, the very incarnation of outrageous power, that would've been the case.

"Okay, I'm ready. Everyone, fall back!"

One of the visitors to the rear gave a signal. The ones fighting at the front fell back, and an enormous glowing red glyph took shape in the sky. A terrifying amount of mana had to be responsible for its creation.

[Th-That's...?!]

Even Rex was speechless. It was none other than grade 5 fire magic. With the cruelty of the largest and strongest act of violence known to this world right before him, Rex opened his jaws wide.

[Everyone! Get awaaaaaay!]

"Burn in hell!"

The grandest magic in the world, which only a select few saviors could use, activated. Its target was the linchpin of the dragons' formation—Rex.

[Ooooooh?!]

A fireball even larger than Rex's body shot out of the glyph.

[Reeex!]

Kath turned around and screamed. She watched the fireball engulf Rex whole. An incandescent gale tore through the air, and the earth quaked. The explosion was so big it could have blown away an entire town.

Despite avoiding a direct hit, the dragons fighting close to Rex were all defeated. Kath was far away, but the searing heat still washed over her and scorched her carapace. If it was that bad at this distance, then for Rex, who took it directly...

Blood drained from Kath's face as she watched the fire burn.

[Don't...look down on me...]

A large shadow moved within the raging blaze. It took one step, then another. It advanced by sheer willpower, refusing to lose. It stirred inside the flames, but it was in a horrific state. Its thick carapace had been carbonized by the heat, and cracks ran down its entire surface due to thermal expansion. One of its eyes was milky, and the wings on its back crumbled off with each step, but the figure still lived. It hadn't been killed. Its tenacity, one that had spanned many, many years, finally overcame even a savior's power.

[Like hell...I'll die...so easily...]

Rex emerged from the fire, his fighting spirit still strong. He looked so heroic...and hence, so pitiful.

[I'm still not... Huh?]

He was shocked speechless. His one remaining eye reflected two gigantic glyphs, one atop the other.

[Wh-What...?]

His eye went wide. These were also grade 5 magic. Unbelievably, a single boy had invoked both. Normally, a person could only deploy one glyph at a time, with the only exception being spiritualists, but they simply had their spirits invoke a second glyph for them. It was impossible for an individual to deploy

multiple glyphs at once. However, saviors overturned such common sense.

“That’s some amazing endurance. Pretty impressive, for a dragon,” said the boy who deployed the glyphs. He was one of the ones who’d come with the ten reinforcements. He pompously held a hand up high. “But that’s not enough to take *me* on.”

The boy’s name was Okazaki Takuma, known as the Almighty Vessel in the exploration team. He snapped his fingers, and five massive spears of ice plunged from the sky toward Rex.

[Ugh! Aaargh?! Aaaaaagh?!]

The spears tore through his carapace and drilled into his muscles. Blood burst into the sky. One pierced each of his limbs, and one his tail. Now pinned to the ground, Rex screamed in agony, yet it still wasn’t over.

The second glyph activated, and a huge mass of earth shot up from the ground. The amalgamation of stone and soil formed a giant arm, stretching high into the sky. It was thick, hard, and huge. That made it slow, but its immense destructive potential made up for it. The only choice when faced with this was to dodge the attack, but that was impossible when pinned down. Rex’s eye reflected the image of the stone hand forming a fist before it came down on him.

[I have to...protect...]

Those were his last words. A thunderous roar drowned out his one and only wish for all eternity. Kath and the other dragons could only watch in shock.



“Man, that one was pretty tough, huh?” Okazaki said indifferently, as if the terrifying spectacle moments ago hadn’t even happened.

Using multiple grand magics was actually quite the burden on him, so he was a little tired, but he still had enough composure to act it up.

“I’m glad I came to help destroy this Dark Wood’s lord. By the looks of it, it wouldn’t have surprised me if one or two of us had croaked.”

One of the others listening to his boasting gave Okazaki a sullen look, but

before he could say anything to Okazaki, another masculine boy stopped him.

“Yeah, you really helped out.”

He was Jinguuji Tomoya, an exploration team member known as the Dragon. He was also the one who’d brought Okazaki here.

“Thanks for lending us a hand,” Jinguuji said.

“It’s no big deal,” Okazaki replied casually.

He was as carefree as when he’d accepted Jinguuji’s request for aid on that street corner some time ago.

“Dark Woods threaten the livelihood of the people,” Okazaki said. “The lords of these forests have to be defeated. That’s our duty as saviors.”

That was common sense here, so nobody questioned his statement.

“But there’s still a risk to doing it,” he continued. “We gotta be safe about it whenever we can. I get why you’re so careful, Jinguuji. That’s why I came with you. Still, you might be a bit *too* careful.”

“Well...”

“Yeah man, I know. That thing you mentioned going on in the small eastern provinces, yeah? Something about guys leaving the exploration team and screwing up big time? Pretty sure you’re overthinking things.”

“If only I was...”

“Anyhoo, it’s got nothing to do with us. This was a perfectly safe subjugation. I mean, we’ve got you and me here.”

Two nicknamed cheaters were present. They also had more than ten visitors with them. In all likelihood, no Dark Woods had ever been attacked by such a powerful force. What’s more, this Dark Woods had exceptionally few monsters in it. That was because the dragons of Draconia had been culling their numbers to prevent as much damage to human society as possible. Thanks to that, the invaders had made it all the way to the settlement without much fatigue.

“All righty then. Guess we can talk later,” Okazaki said, bringing the conversation to an end. “Let’s finish exterminating us some dragons.” He turned

his focus to Kath's group. "Those things get away, and some helpless folks might fall victim to them."

[Ah...]

The dragons were badly injured just from the aftermath of the magic he'd used on Rex. They'd be done for if they took any direct attacks like that. Even the ferocious dragons were no more than prey at this point.

"Let's roll."

And so a hopeless chase began—at the current rate, that was sure to unfold—but just then, a shadow fell over the small hunters, a shadow much larger than it had any right to be.

"This, I never foresaw."

"Wha—?!" Startled by the sudden event, the visitors came to a stop.

"I never even conceived the notion. To think the Mist Barrier would be undone so quickly."

The carapace wyrm Malvina, her wings spread wide, thrust herself between her children and their hunters.

[Mother!] Kath cried.

"I'm sorry I'm late. I was stalled," Malvina replied, but she didn't turn to face her children. Her eyes remained vigilantly fixed on the visitors. "Now then, I shall be your opponent, humans."

[Mother! You mustn't! We'll fight too!]

"Hmph. Don't be foolish."

[Mother!]

"Run, Kath. All of you must survive, no matter what happens."

Sensing the urgency in Malvina's voice, Kath could no longer object. The dragons shook free of any lingering reluctance and ran off.

"S-So this is the Dark Woods' lord?! Brace yourselves, everyone!"

The boys had also been talking to each other while Malvina had been

speaking to her children. Faced with such an enormous monster, even these visitors had to remain on guard. That was rather convenient for Malvina, though. The more careful they were, the more likely it was for Kath and her other children to get away.

“At any rate...” Malvina sensed her children getting farther and farther away, then let out a small sigh. “I don’t understand a thing they’ve been saying. Good grief, I can’t even grumble a complaint or two at them. I should’ve brought a translation runestone.”

Unlike her children, Malvina could speak the human language even in her dragon form. However, even other humans needed translation runestones to communicate with visitors from other worlds. It was impossible to talk to them, so it was impossible to appeal to them about the intelligence she and her children possessed. Not that this was much of a problem at this point: it was far too late to reconcile with words.

“Hmph. I see. So that’s how the Mist Barrier was broken.”

Malvina accumulated her mana as she observed the enemy. She narrowed her eyes when they fell upon Jinguuji Tomoya.

“Much like him, that boy has the ability to turn into a dragon. Now that I think of it, a stupid number of visitors came to this world this time around. I suppose it isn’t all that strange for one to have the same ability as him.”

Befitting of his nickname, Jinguuji Tomoya had dragon wings sprouting from his back. They were what had rendered the Mist Barrier useless.

“A barrier that makes it difficult for anyone but a dragon to get through is meaningless against another dragon. You really got us good,” Malvina said with another sigh. “Well, some parts of this don’t make sense, but there’s not much else I can learn with this language barrier. Or perhaps there’s no meaning in such talks at this late hour. Hmph. I thought I had long resolved myself for this, but look at me now.”

Malvina had lived a long life. She considered it more than enough time, so if humans ever attacked the settlement, she believed she was fine with sacrificing herself to let her children get away. She didn’t have the willpower to claw for the slimmest chance of survival.

She'd had everything stolen from her, had escaped to safety, and had lived a life where all she'd done was hide. She'd gotten tired of it. But now, things were different. She'd been given a glimpse of hope, after all.

Her old friend had brought a boy to her that reminded Malvina of her late beloved. At the end of that boy's dream, there would be no need for her children to live in hiding like this. They could spread their wings and live freely. In that future, maybe Malvina could reconcile with her youngest daughter. Maybe she could convey her love to the child.

That future surely existed, but Malvina's days were over. These were the last logical thoughts to go through the carapace wyrm's head. From this point on, she decided she would become a beast driven only by hatred.

"How dare you, humans..."

Dark emotions clouded her once-rational eyes. She stepped forward into the pool of blood spreading from Rex's headless corpse.

Her beloved children, those quiet days—even the ones that were a result of flight and stagnation—all of it stolen, broken, and crushed underfoot. She would never, ever forgive them. Even if these boys didn't understand Malvina's circumstances, even if they'd only attacked out of a sense of righteousness, none of that could rationalize what they'd destroyed.

"Now that you've done as you pleased, don't think you'll be able to leave this place so easily."

The disparity in power here didn't matter. The visitors gulped at the pure strength of the dragon before them and dreaded her emotions being turned against them.

Malvina's enemies were saviors; they had the power to save the world. If she didn't give in to rage and hatred, if she didn't lose her mind, she wouldn't be able to oppose them. Thus, she threw away the heart her beloved had given her and returned to being a senseless monster.

She spat out what had been stuck in her mouth. The visitors put themselves on guard, thinking it was some sort of attack. Something crashed into the ground in front of them, but nothing happened as a result. Okazaki Takuma

strained his eyes, wondering what was going on, then shrieked.

“A-Aaaah! N-No way! You’re kidding me!”

He’d realized what those dark-red clumps were. They were his friends—his dead friends. They were the boys who’d stalled Malvina during the attack on the settlement. Using the time that Okazaki took to focus on using two grade 5 magics to murder Rex, she’d killed them.

These visitors had never truly surmounted a life-or-death situation. Even if they possessed the greatest combat strength in the world, they were still nothing more than children who were drunk on peace. By taking full advantage of that, by being ready to die with every exchange of blows, it was possible to kill them.

Witnessing the bloody deaths their comrades had gone through, the visitors became restless. Malvina wasn’t one to let such an opening pass. She let out a roar befitting her mountain-like stature and charged forward. Her few children who still remained followed as if spurred by her madness and rage.

What should’ve been a perfectly safe subjugation had degraded into a bloody struggle to the death.

Chapter 7: That Night's Dream *Rose's POV*

"Terrible news!" I yelled, jumping into the manamobile.

One beat later, Lily, who'd been casting healing magic on our master, raised her head.

"Rose...?"

Her movements were sluggish, and there was no strength in her expression. She was clearly exhausted. She'd been using healing magic for several days intermittently, so she hadn't had the time to properly rest her body and mind.

"You're back? What happened?" she asked anxiously. "I heard the Mist Barrier is gone and Lobivia ran off..."

"I went after Lobivia," I said quickly as I sat down next to her. "She's with Kath right now."

"Huh? With Kath...?"

"Lobivia found her. Kath has suffered a horrible wound. It's bad enough that even with the sturdy body of a dragon, she'll die if left alone."

"You don't mean..."

Lily turned pale. It pained my heart, but I had to say it.

"I thought it'd be bad to move her around too much, so I couldn't bring her here. I told Lobivia to stop the bleeding. That is only delaying the inevitable, though. I doubt she'll manage without your healing magic. I came here to inform you."

"I-I get what you're saying..." Lily said, a bitter look on her face, "but right now..."

Her eyes fell to our master. He'd used magic to save us from the pursuit force's ambush, but that had been a double-edged sword. With his natural resistance now weaker, the Holy Water had wormed its way through his body even more aggressively.

Even if Lily left things here to us and went to treat Kath, Mana and Kei were both completely spent and in no state to use any magic. Forcing them to do so could lead to their collapsing. In other words, going to help Kath meant leaving our master alone. Lily would have to force her beloved to suffer.

Having said that, prioritizing our master was almost equivalent to abandoning Kath. Lily bit her lip, a cruel decision thrust upon her, but an unlikely source saved her from this dilemma.

“Go...Lily,” said our master, still lying on the floor.

“Master? You’re awake?”

“I just...woke up.”

He hadn’t recovered in the slightest. His breathing was shallow, and the simple act of opening his mouth looked as if it pained him. Nevertheless, he didn’t hesitate.

“Go to her.”

We could sense the determination behind his words.

“B-But...” Lily protested, her eyes wavering.

“I’ve gotten somewhat...used to the Holy Water’s pace. I can hold out...for a little while.” He smiled, consideration evident on his emaciated features. “I’ll be fine. Lobivia is waiting. Please.”

“Master...”

Lily pursed her lips as many emotions ran wild in her chest. She then nodded, swallowing all those emotions away.

“Fine.” She stopped her healing magic, stooped over, and gave our master a kiss on the cheek. “I’ll be right back.” She stood up sadly, and as she walked out of the manamobile, she put her hand on my shoulder. “Rose, I’m leaving him in your hands.”

“Understood.”

“Sorry...”

With that, Lily left, looking extremely apologetic. I understood the meaning

behind that, of course. With her gone, the poison in our master's system would torture him. Leaving things here to me was the same as telling me to watch that unfold with my own eyes.



My master had claimed he could “hold out for a little while.” He hadn’t been bluffing. In truth, even without healing magic, the Holy Water wasn’t ravaging his system much more than it had been. He still suffered, though. In fact, resisting the poison probably amplified the pain.

“Ugh... Guh...”

My master’s breathing was ragged, and pained groans intermittently leaked from his dry lips. His eyes were faintly open, but they were unfocused. It was questionable whether he was actually conscious

I sat on my heels at his side, watching over him, ready to call my sister or Mana at a moment’s notice if things took a turn for the worse. It felt as if the entire world consisted only of this narrow space. That wasn’t true, of course. The enemy was still on the move. They could launch an attack on us at this very moment.

Once Lily finished doing the bare minimum to stabilize Kath and returned, we would have to get moving again right away. It was fortunate in a sense, since the elves needed rest, so this time spent standing still wasn’t useless. Sadly, it was far too short for any proper rest. As for whether we could get the entire group moving again...

“Rose...?”

As such anxieties ran wild in my heart, my master called my name. His voice was hoarse and quiet, but I couldn’t miss it.

“Do you need something?” I asked. Bringing my distracted thoughts to an end, I looked at his face. “Water? Or perhaps a change of clothes? Please, ask anything that you will.”

“Aah, no. Nothing like that. I was just wondering if you were there.”

That made sense. I’d been silent all this time, so it wasn’t clear whether I was

present. Or maybe he was just that weak. I hesitated a little, then gripped my master's hand. He returned my grip immediately. It was so sad how little strength he had in his fingers. Watching him, I felt his suffering as if it were my own, but what pained me more was being unable to do anything for him.

"Please be at ease. I'll be by your side until my sister returns."

I felt the cynicism in my own words. Why would he feel at ease to have me at his side? All I could do was be here, and that vexed me.

"I can't do anything," I continued, "so I'll do my best to at least be here as my sister's substitute."

What was I capable of? Standing by as a guard, watching for sudden developments, helping with his various needs—that was pretty much it.

I picked up the towel soaking in a bucket of water, bent over, and wiped the sweat from my master's forehead, when he grasped my wrist.

"You're wrong," he said.

"Ah..."

His eyes had been unfocused, but they met mine perfectly. It was the gentle gaze he always gave me.

"You're not a substitute," he said. "Having you by my side puts me at ease."

He'd definitely sensed that I was feeling down. Poison ravaged his body, and he moaned in pain, but he still spoke to me. His words weren't out of mere consideration either. My master was glad from the bottom of his heart to have me here. Knowing that felt like salvation.

"There's no need to feel down," he said, pulling me in with a trembling hand. He was so weak a baby could ward him off, but it was impossible for me to resist. "It's fine so long as you stay by my side."

Pulled in by him, I went with the flow and leaned against his chest. He cradled me in his arms. Despite what was going on, euphoria filled me from the top of my head to the tips of my toes. I remembered this sensation, and for a single instant, it was as if I'd gone back in time. Perhaps my master felt the same way.

"This is nostalgic, huh?" he said, chuckling hoarsely. "Do you remember

something like this happening before?”

“Of course,” I mumbled, my voice muffled by his chest. “I can’t possibly forget.”

It had happened on that night in the Woodlands, when we’d spent our days in that cave. This was something I’d been pursuing ever since. I truly wished that time would stop right now.

We remained as we were, unmoving, until Lily returned.

Chapter 8: The Puppet's Secret Plan *Rose's POV*

It didn't take that long for Lily to come back. Kath's life was no longer in danger, so we could at least feel relieved about that. Kath was unconscious now and lying in the same vehicle as my master. Lily went back to continuously healing him, and I switched places with her and got out of the manamobile with Lobivia.

"Are you all right?" I asked her.

"Mm..." She nodded, but her expression was dark.

"May I have a moment, Rose?" Shiran said, running over to us with a stern look. "Have you heard about the enemy's movements from Lily?"

Kath had given us this information before passing out.

"Yes," I answered. "They're apparently coming from the opposite side of the wetlands. I thought they were chasing us through the Woodlands, though..."

"They have a surplus of force. They may have split into two groups to take us down for sure."

"Meaning we've been perfectly lured into a pincer attack."

"Yes. It's good that Kath informed us. It's unfortunate what happened to Draconia, though..."

Shiran's expression darkened. Kath had told Lobivia about Draconia's fate. Malvina had suffered an honorable defeat after a head-on confrontation with a group of invading saviors. That obstinate man, Rex, had also died in battle.

Kath and a group of her siblings had encountered a lone savior while escaping from the settlement. She'd managed to get away while suffering major wounds, but she'd gotten separated from her siblings in the process, so their safety was currently unknown. I couldn't even imagine what was going on in Lobivia's heart after having lost her home and family.

"Lobivia, we don't mind if you stay with Kath," I said.

“I have to fight,” she replied, shaking her head. It wouldn’t have been strange if she’d broken down and cried, but she refused to act so helpless. “We don’t got enough hands to go around, yeah?”

That was true. If we removed Lobivia from our active forces, we would definitely be understaffed to protect everyone.

“Forgive us,” I said. “If only we were stronger, then we wouldn’t have to place this burden on you.”

“Don’t worry about it. We’re all in the same boat,” Lobivia said. Even though she was pale, she put on a strong front and curved her lips into a smile before turning to Shiran. “Anyway, what’re we gonna do?”

“Until now, we’ve been aiming for the Mist Barrier in northern Aker,” Shiran started. “However, that barrier is already gone. I’m assuming the enemy knew this was going to happen, so the knights of the Holy Order accompanying them likely provided them with this information. If we continue through the wetlands, we’ll run headlong into the force that has gone around ahead of us. The enemy is still chasing us from behind, so we can’t turn around either.”

From our current position, north and east led into the wetlands, while south and west led into the Woodlands. The wetlands were dangerous, and turning back was useless, so we only had one direction left to go.

“So we turn west?” Lobivia concluded.

“Yes. We’ll return to the Woodlands and head west,” Shiran answered, nodding.

“But if we do nothing but run, won’t they eventually catch up?” I asked.

“Yes, but if we stop, we’ll be overwhelmed. Now that it’s come to this, our only choice is to try and put together a plan while running away. I’ll go speak with everyone. Rose, Lobivia, please get ready.”

With that, Shiran began calling out the elves. Even with things looking so dire, even though she knew how bad things were, she’d yet to give up. Nevertheless, we had to find some way to get through this. I could feel how strong Shiran’s will was to do what was necessary to that end. The problem was whether we’d even be able to buy the time we needed.

“Lobivia, I’ll go inform Gerbera’s group. Can you tell Lily?”

“Got it.”

I decided that Lobivia should spend as much time by Kath’s side as possible, so I left the manamobile to her while I spoke to others who were farther away. While I was at it, I checked on how the elves were doing.

The majority of them were sitting on the ground. They were at the limit of their stamina and strength. What’s more, I was worried about their mental state. They’d believed it would work out somehow after coming this far, which was what had driven them to keep on going. The destination they’d reached wasn’t safe, though, so it wouldn’t be surprising if their hearts had broken at this point.

Leah and Helena went around with Shiran, trying to comfort them. The two of them looked so worn out, but they were doing everything they could to improve the situation. Each elf they spoke to got up despite their fatigue.

But the heart wasn’t so simple. Would we be able to escape like this? I clenched my fist, feeling pathetic. Shiran refused to give up, instead searching for a way through this crisis, although her body’s poor state was dragging her down. Lobivia had just lost her family, but she gathered the will to keep fighting. The elves were trying their best too. But if things were still beyond hope—

“Rose.”

“Mana?”

I turned around to see my best friend. She looked terribly pale. She’d used too much magic, and our constant days of flight had been a large burden on her body.

“What’s the matter? Shouldn’t you be—”

“I have something to say. Come with me for a bit,” Mana said, interrupting me and leading me away by the hand.

We went around to the shadow of the manamobile. Apparently, she wanted to talk in private. Vaguely, just vaguely, I got a bad premonition.

“I heard about the situation,” Mana said.

Her expression was stiff, her face that of someone at the end of their rope. This made perfect sense given the circumstances, but something about it...



“I have an idea,” she started. My intuition was telling me that something about this was wrong. “Things are as bad as they can be, but there’s a way we can get through it. I mean, until now, if we really wanted to, we could have counterattacked too.”

“Mana, don’t.”

I didn’t want her to say it, but she didn’t stop.

“Rose, you and the others must’ve figured it out already. We can’t do anything because we have the elves with us.”

She said it. Her voice sounded so hoarse.

“If it were just your small group,” she continued, “we could’ve even slipped through the azure hares’ breeding ground. A big army can’t do anything like that, so they would’ve had to clash with the azure hares. That would’ve been enough to hold them back.”

She spoke quickly, her voice trembling. It was as if something were forcing her to keep going.

“We can even move faster. In the worst case, we could go deeper into the Woodlands. We have plenty of choices. It’s still not too late. It’s simple. If we abandon—”

“Mana!”

I raised my voice and cut her off. I couldn’t keep listening. Mana looked white as a sheet as she tried to propose a heartless plan. She was so stiff that she seemed liable to collapse at any moment.

“It’s fine, Mana. There’s no need for you to play the villain.”

I already knew. My best friend was a very kind girl. She’d been so helpful to me in so many ways when I’d been nothing more than a featureless puppet. She’d had so much fun when interacting with the village children.

She was merciless toward her enemies, but she didn’t have the heart to calmly abandon her allies. Above all else, if she had to make such a decision, she would take responsibility for it herself. She would surely stay behind with the abandoned elves, but I couldn’t possibly allow that.

“You’re tired, Mana,” I said, putting my hand on her shoulder and pressing my forehead against hers. “Get some sleep and calm down. You’ll come up with a better idea. After all, you’re my best friend, and I’m so very proud of you.”

“Rose...”

“I’ll buy some time until you can think of something. I have an idea of my own.”

“You do?”

“Yes. It’s a little dangerous, but it’ll buy us some time.”

With her face right in front of mine, I met her eyes and smiled. She was my first friend, and I loved her so very much. I prayed her heart could remain at peace.

Then, I quickly explained my plan.



After Shiran approved it, we quickly put the plan I had detailed to Mana into action. It sounded grandiose when put like that, but it was just something simple even I could come up with. It wasn’t all that impressive.

“Sorry for asking you to stay with me, Berta,” I said to the wolf next to me. I kept working even as we talked.

“I don’t mind.”

The plan was simple. I would stay behind until the very last moment and prepare traps to slow down the army behind us. Using that time, we would get the slower-moving elves as far away as possible. Once I was done setting the traps, I would follow after my companions. There was a risk the enemy would catch me, though, so I had the fleet-footed Berta stay behind with me, just in case.

That was the entirety of my plan. It was, of course, extremely dangerous. There was no guarantee I could get away, even with Berta here. Also, the defensive formation around the elves would be weaker without us, so if the pursuit force attacked them, it was possible they would suffer a great many casualties. It was even questionable whether I had the time to set any useful

traps.

Sadly, we were so far at the end of our rope that we had to resort to these luck-dependent methods. We had to do what we could. That was my claim, and that was how I'd gotten the plan approved. The deciding factor was one of the magic tools I'd developed that could inflict severe damage on the enemy army. Well, even without that, we didn't have any other plans. That was why I was here now.

"Get it done quickly," Berta urged me on. "It'll be too late when the enemy gets here."

"I know."

I emptied the contents of my tool bag. I had a good grasp of what was inside, even if not to the extent Mana did.

"What's that?" Berta asked, looking at one of the objects on the ground.

"It's called a matryoshka doll. It's modeled after Lily. You can split it open here, and there's a smaller Lily within. Inside that one is a doll of Ayame."

"Is that going to be of any use?"

"No. It's just a toy. It's one of Gerbera's favorites."

"What happened to setting traps?"

"I'm just taking everything out now," I answered, still pulling things from the bag all the while. "Sorry. There isn't much time. Can you lend me a hand?"

"Aren't I here as an escort?"

So she grumbled, but Berta stretched out her tentacles and fished things out of the magic bag with an unexpectedly delicate touch.

"There's a lot in here..." she muttered after getting most of the stuff out. She sounded somewhat exasperated.

"All of this signifies the progress I've made since the very beginning, though that's an exaggerated way to put it."

The items formed a small mountain. I'd poured my heart into making each and every one. Emotions flowed through me, but now wasn't the time to bask

in such thoughts.

“Now then,” I said, fishing through to find what I needed.

Some items could be used as is, but others had to be assembled. Fortunately, there was an abundance of goods here. I’d made far too many for my master’s sake, against my better judgment, but now that actually came in handy.

“It’s a little late to ask, but did we really need to take out everything?” Berta asked.

“Yes, we did,” I answered as I put a few things together. “I have to expend my everything.”

“Expend...?” Berta watched me work and wrinkled her large snout, then narrowed her eyes and growled deeply. “Hey, puppet. What the hell are you putting together?”

She sounded awfully suspicious, but I’d predicted this.

“Are you telling me that’s a trap?” she continued. “There’s no way it is. What are you plotting?”

I stopped my work and looked up at her, staring right back into her wolflike eyes.

“Berta, I have a request to make of you.”

Chapter 9: The Puppet's Love *Rose's POV*

After a moment of silence, Berta let out a deep sigh.

"Let's hear it," she said.

She looked as if she had an inkling about what I was going to say. This made me feel even guiltier, but I couldn't stop now.

"Berta, I'd like you to leave right away and go back to the others. With both of us gone, their defenses are significantly weaker. It'll be bad if they're attacked."

"So you're planning on staying even though you know the elves are at risk. That wasn't what you suggested, though. I believe I stayed back here with you so that you could finish your work until the last minute and withdraw."

"There's no need for that. Don't mind me and go after the others. With your sharp sense of smell, you should be able to keep some distance from them so that they don't notice you've returned. Please do so and jump in to help if the enemy attacks them."

"You're telling me to hide from your companions? So it's just as I thought." All four of the wolf's eyes filled with pity. "Do you plan on staying behind on your own to stall the enemy?"

"Yes." I nodded. This was my true plan, one I'd kept from all the others. "I must apologize for tricking you."

"So was that talk of traps just nonsense?"

"Yes. I don't have anything so convenient. Regardless, the situation has already gotten to the point where someone has to stall their advance."

At this rate, the enemy would overtake us. Their objective was our master's life, and they would show no mercy if they caught up. That was the one thing I could never allow. Someone had to do something.

"I understand that," Berta said, "but why do you need to stay behind?"

"I'm the most suitable for the task," I answered immediately. I'd come to this

decision after giving it plenty of thought already. “Lily obviously has to stay by our master’s side to heal him. As his strongest servant, Gerbera can’t leave his side either. In contrast, Ayame isn’t strong enough to stall the army. Shiran, Salvia, and Asarina can’t move because of their dependence on our master. Lobivia is not only injured, but emotionally wounded, so I doubt she’ll be able to put up a fight.”

My explanation came out smoothly. I’d thought this all out.

“This is my duty,” I continued. “My body is my master’s shield. From the very day I met him in the Woodlands, I’ve existed to defend him from any and all calamities. I don’t care if I’m reduced to wood chips in the process. In short, the time has simply come.”

I didn’t hesitate whatsoever to make such a declaration.

“Besides, this choice minimizes our losses,” I added. “Lily is a unique monster who has exhibited remarkable growth. Gerbera is the legendary Great White Spider, and Salvia is spoken of in folklore. They’re both high monsters with great power. Lobivia is the daughter of a savior. Ayame, who became a servant at such a young age, and Asarina, who was born with her roots inside our master, both have unfathomable potential.”

If any of them were to perish, the impact of the loss would be off the charts. They had roles to fulfill in the future—unlike me.

“I, on the other hand, am nothing more than a rare monster,” I said. “I’m different from the others.”

Puppets like me were scarce, but not unique. I wasn’t a higher being or anything special. If my master were to return to the Woodlands and spend enough time and effort, he could find another monster like me out there.

“Above all else, my master has gotten strong,” I said. “In the not too distant future, I’m sure he’ll overtake me. He’ll no longer need me as his shield. If this is to be my last job, then maybe it has come at just the right time.”

“I don’t believe your companions think the same way, though,” Berta noted.

“Yes, I know. That’s why this is ultimately my problem.”

I'd conveyed as much to my master back during our time in the Woodlands.

"I exist to protect you. I don't care if my body is reduced to wood chips as long as I can accomplish that."

This was the reason for my birth, so I was only doing what was natural to me. Besides, in the end, I'd gotten an unexpected reward. Thinking back on it, I felt myself breaking into a smile.

Yes. I'd finally gotten a hug from my master.

I knew it was imprudent to think of such things right now given the situation, but my heart didn't lie. I was happy. I was blessed.

In all likelihood, that moment inside the narrow confines of the manamobile was the end goal of my existence. That was what I believed. Thus, I'd made my decision.

"Please go, Berta."

I would meet the enemy right here. If I could deal a major blow to them, it would slow them down. If I bet everything I had in a do-or-die attack, maybe I could even buy an extra day for the others to rally.

One reason I'd asked Berta to stay with me was because I needed an excuse to remain behind. The bigger reason, though, was because she wasn't my master's servant. It would've taken a tremendous amount of effort to convince my sisters of this plan, but Berta was different. She had no reason to stop me. Or at least, that was what I thought, but what happened next was unforeseeable.

"Is this really okay?" Berta asked.

"Huh?"

"Are you really convinced this is the right choice?" She took one step toward me, the tentacles at her waist swaying about. "Do you have no regrets?"

Each of her words was tinged with violent emotions. Apparently, our conversation had touched a nerve. It was as if she was angry and irritated, as if she wasn't going to let me do this. The strength of her emotions pressed me for an honest answer.

“Berta...”

I hesitated for just a moment. I would sacrifice my life to protect my master. That idea was natural to me, so I’d never given it a second thought. It wasn’t as if my answer would change if I did think about it. I was my master’s shield, so it was fine.

That was my answer, but no words came out. This was unexpected. My body was that of a puppet. I could move it even if it was cracked, but now something bound it. Something from the outside took root inside me and threatened my heart. I needed several seconds to realize that this was the emotion called fear. I didn’t believe it, but that didn’t change reality.

I was scared, and now that I was aware of it, my limbs trembled. I was going to be destroyed. I was going to shatter as my master’s shield, just as I’d once resolved myself to do. I was scared of that outcome—unbearably terrified of it.

Why now? I’d thought that being reduced to wood chips didn’t matter. Had that determination been a lie? How could I turn timid just at the end?

No, that wasn’t quite right. That wasn’t right at all. My fear signified something else.

I recalled Berta’s questions.

Was this really okay? Was I really convinced this was the right choice? Did I have no regrets?

Obviously, I thought this was okay. I was convinced it was right too, but yes, she did have a point.

Regrets? My heart was filled with them. I still hadn’t accomplished what I desired to do. That was what my heart insisted. In a sense, that was obvious. I’d once talked with Gerbera about it.

“You’ve been adorning your body so that our lord will hug you, correct?”

“Even now, do you not think about what comes after that?”

In response, I’d answered, *“No, I do. It’s true. Somewhere inside me, I want what comes next. I realized that desire was always there.”*

I had become aware of my desire for “what comes next” at that time, but I

still didn't know what exactly that was. I'd figured I would find out after getting that hug, and that part of my wish had already been granted, so progressing to "what comes next" was the natural course of events.

"Then, Rose, do you want to embrace our lord, kiss him, let him touch you, and make love?"

I'd frozen at Gerbera's question back then. It had just seemed so outrageous. But now I understood. I'd realized it at the eleventh hour.

She was right. That was exactly what I wanted.

I wanted to embrace my master.

I wanted to kiss him.

I wanted him to touch me.

I wanted to make love to him.

I'd probably been in love with him for a long time now but simply hadn't noticed because of how dense I was. All this time, I'd been head over heels.

"Yes... You're right. I don't want to die yet," I said, my feelings rushing out my mouth. "It's a little late for me to notice. I've been in love with my master... But at this rate, those feelings will come to a fruitless end before I can tell him. I don't want that."

I was finally aware of my own feelings, and I wanted to convey them to him. I strongly, strongly wished to do so. I didn't want things to end before they even got a chance to start. For the first time in my life as a mere puppet, I wished for this from the bottom of my heart. However, that was exactly why...

"You'll go regardless?" Berta asked.

"Yes," I answered with a smile. "I'm in love, so I don't want things to end here, but I also want to protect my beloved in equal measure."

The heart and the emotions within us were such complicated things. In the end, my resolve had only hardened, and I no longer wavered.

"Goodbye, Master."

I thought of my beloved, who was getting farther and farther away, and

quietly put my hand to my chest. The sensation of the pendant that sat there was so very precious, and it granted me the bravery to stand against despair.

“I yearn for you, even if this body must break.”

This wasn't a simple matter of loyalty. I headed to certain death for the sake of my own love.

“Please stay safe.”

That was all I wished for.

Chapter 10: Rampage

Essentially, the armed forces of this world were made up of standing armies in the employ of local feudal lords. The people faced constant threat from monsters, so life here couldn't be maintained without them. There were also those among the common populace who could fight, but they largely belonged to militias. These militias cooperated with the local armies to protect their villages and towns, but while some did advance into the army, these were two different organizations.

The Maclaurin Provincial Army was no exception. The soldiers served the margraviate's house, so they were exceptionally loyal. The current margrave, Glantri Maclaurin, spared no expense to protect the people of his territory, so he treated his soldiers far better than any other province did. The organization itself was sound, evidenced by how a lowborn man like Louis could climb high among its ranks, and there was no cause for discontent down to their lowest ranks.

The provincial army usually protected its own territory from monsters, so being dispatched to a foreign nation like Aker was an irregularity, but morale hadn't dropped due to the aforementioned factors. On the contrary, being dispatched all the way to Aker to "subjugate the fake savior who has brought harm to the populace" convinced them that their feudal lord was the greatest of men.

That was in fact true. The margrave was a splendid lord, at least to those living in his territory. That was why none of the soldiers questioned what they were doing. They felt nothing when it came to attacking the elves of the reclamation village.

Contempt for elves was common sense in the margraviate. Practically no elves lived there, and many of the citizens saw them as incomprehensible beings who'd slipped into human society in other territories. This obviously wasn't the opinion of every single citizen of the margraviate, but those who

questioned such ideas were the minority, and Louis had kept such people away from positions of leadership in the provincial army.

What's more, the elves were guilty of "colluding with the fake savior," so the soldiers didn't hesitate to hunt them down like dogs.

"Just a little farther," Louis Bard muttered to himself from atop his horse.

He was leading the main force of his army through the Woodlands. He'd split off a detached force of two thousand men, but the main force still numbered over three thousand. By the end of today, or by tomorrow at the latest, everything would be settled.

The soldiers would be awarded with medals for the long expedition, and Louis would be credited with the honor of defeating the fake savior. Private talks had already been held for him to wed one of the margrave's daughters. There were the other nobles to consider, so he'd be marrying a daughter further down the line of succession, but this still demonstrated how much trust Glantri Maclaurin had in him. Louis's position within the margraviate was sure to become rock solid.

Not that Louis had much interest in his own reputation to begin with. What brought him joy was the fact that he'd be able to serve the margraviate even better than before, the fact that the margrave had such faith in him, and the fact that the man he idolized like a father would truly become his father-in-law. He had to bring this battle to an end to live up to the trust the margrave had put in him.

Just as Louis renewed his determination, a soldier came running over to him.

"Commander Louis, I have a report."

"What is it?"

"We found something strange to the front. We'd like instructions on how to deal with it."

"Something strange?"

Louis grimaced. He brought his horse to a stop and pulled up a telescope. There was, in fact, a mysterious object to the front. To describe it plainly, it was

a matte-black box. It looked to be made of some sort of metal, and it was shaped like multiple boxes with their corners rounded off, stacked atop one another. Judging by the nearby trees, it was about as tall as a human.

This was clearly suspicious. It was still far away, so he couldn't make out any details, but at the very least, he could tell the object wasn't natural. He had no idea what it was for, but considering the current situation and its placement, it was very likely something Majima Takahiro's group had set there to retaliate against the army.

It was large enough for someone to fit inside, so maybe something was hidden within. Or perhaps it was some sort of trap. It didn't really matter either way. They had no reason to carelessly approach something so glaringly suspicious.

"It's no obstruction if we simply blow it up from afar," Louis concluded, and just as he was about to pass the order... "Huh?"

A sound of puzzlement made its way up Louis's throat. The unusual box had started moving, sliding across the ground. Although he gasped at the unexpected development, Louis was an outstanding commander. He immediately came back to his senses and strained to see through the telescope. After several seconds, he realized that the box had wheels.

"It can't be... That's a transport manamobile!"

They were mainly used by armies to ferry goods through the Woodlands, but they were also sold secondhand to the general populace. The provincial army had brought several of them on this expedition. The reason Louis hadn't realized sooner was because planks were positioned over the wheels as if to protect them from the sides. Its uncommon shape had misled him. That wasn't the only odd thing about it either.

"Isn't it moving a little *too* fast?"

At first, it was only moving at walking speed. However, it gradually built up to running speed, then kept going to a point that no normal person would be able to keep up with it.

"But that's impossible..."

Manamobiles couldn't move very fast. That was common knowledge, so it was natural for Louis to be surprised by this sight. Nobody in this world had ever seen the like. Somebody from another world would be a different matter, though.

If any visitors were present, they'd liken it to a car, which was largely the right impression. The vehicle's creator had heard stories of another world from the master she loyally served and had since held great admiration for the automobile.

"Tch! Destroy it with magic!"

If there were any enemies on board, Louis couldn't allow them to get close. He'd been slow to react because of the outlandishness of the situation, but it wasn't too late to turn the tables.

The provincial army was well trained. They'd been drilled on how to react to sudden ambushes. The moment Louis sent word, the officer at the front had the men take up formations. Shields lined up as those behind them intercepted the enemy. Seeing as how the vehicle looked to be covered in metal, they'd judged that arrows would have little effect, so the attack consisted mostly of magic.

A barrage of fire poured down on the manamobile. Because of the vehicle's unexpected speed, not all the projectiles found their mark, but with so many of them, some were bound to hit. Multiple pillars of fire burst from the vehicle's surface.

"Excellent."

Louis nodded as he peered through his telescope, but several seconds later, a deep crease formed between his brows.

"What...?"

Even after being struck by magic, the mysterious vehicle remained on course.

"Impossible..."

Louis's shock was understandable. The entire exterior of this manamobile was made of the same material as Lily's black spear, so it was practically an armored

personnel carrier. The provincial army—or anyone else from this world for that matter—would never think that such a thing existed.

Before they could admire how well-made it was, they had to wonder why such a thing had been made in the first place. The truth was rather ridiculous. After all, the concept behind the vehicle's development was to make something that wouldn't break even if Gerbera swung it around, so it was the eccentric product of Gerbera's smashing their last manamobile into smithereens during their fight with the Skanda lino Yuna. In truth, it was more of a blunt weapon than a vehicle.

It didn't make any sense. It was hard to tell since she was so serious and levelheaded, but the girl who'd created it could be a bit of an airhead. Normally, someone would've stopped her before it reached this stage, but when faced with his servant's enthusiasm to one day make a car, her master had carelessly forgotten to quip that a car wasn't a blunt weapon. Before he knew it, it was already too late.

She hadn't created this on the spot, of course. She'd made too many of the necessary parts even before the group's first visit to Diospyro, so she'd had several vehicles' worth stored away in her magic bags. As for the runestone that served as its engine, she'd used a spare they'd procured for their own manamobile. In other words, aside from the abnormally tough exterior plating, everything else was made of standard parts.

For that reason, the shocking speed had to come from some other technology, which she'd used once before already. In the defensive battle against the Holy Order, she'd repulsed the enemy using combat fireworks—magic tools that used runestones to their breaking point to yield a tremendous output. She'd put the same thing into practice here too. To be more specific, the combat fireworks were a byproduct of creating this manamobile.

If there was one flaw to point out, it was that she wasn't yet able to create an imitation of the main runestone yet. Every time they cranked it up to such speeds, they'd have to go buy a new one, so this was far from being practical for everyday use. She'd been so dejected by this outcome. Not even she believed that the day would come where it would be of some use like this.

“It’s not stopping!”

The runaway vehicle quickly closed the distance. It was showing some damage, but it wasn’t slowing down. On the contrary, it was getting even faster.

“Wait, stop...”

The blood drained from Louis’s face. He now had an idea of what the enemy was planning.

“Wait. Hang on. It can’t be...”

He had the right idea, but the puppet’s rampage was far beyond anything he imagined. The rear end of the vehicle suddenly exploded. This wasn’t because of the ongoing magic barrage; the imitation runestones planted inside the vehicle itself had caused it. The purpose behind this was to generate even more propulsion. The manamobile closed the remaining distance at quite literally an explosive speed.

“What do you think of this, Master? Rockets are the thing of dreams, right?”

“Who told you that? Oh, never mind. It was Mikihiko again, huh?”

Her master had been at a loss when she introduced the idea to him. He couldn’t help but deeply sigh as he thought of his best friend throwing him a thumbs-up. After seeing how happy his servant was, though, he’d relaxed and smiled.

“Well, whatever.”

“Ummm, is something the matter, Master?”

“It’s nothing. If you’re enjoying yourself, it’s all fine.”

Her normal composure had vanished in cheerful glee. She’d cocked her head in confusion, the innocence of such a gesture having only deepened the boy’s smile.

The end result was far less pleasant for Louis and his men, however.

“Eeeek! Aaaaah!”

The soldiers at the front screamed. They’d been prepared for any monster attack, but nobody had even dreamed of such an inexplicable object hurtling

toward them. There was no time to run away. The mystery vehicle, far removed from the initial concept of a modern car, smashed into the front line of the provincial army.

They'd had their shields ready, but those were blown away in an instant. The soldiers behind them were crushed before they had any idea of what was going on. The vehicle's front end collapsed in, and the back wheels sprang off the ground as it pitched forward. Nevertheless, it didn't lose momentum. It continued tumbling end over end, flattening soldiers in its path and sending some flying away. Everyone was screaming in panic.

Before long, the vehicle came to a stop upside down. It was a disaster. Injured soldiers groaned all over. The ones who'd been out of harm's way were speechless, incapable of understanding the spectacle before them.

After a good ten seconds, someone kicked the manamobile's door open from the inside. Several soldiers screeched at the sight. Whoever it was had been responsible for this hellish scene, so they had to be some kind of outrageous horror. With that thought in mind, even these elite soldiers remained frozen in place. They readied themselves for a nightmare, and precisely because of that, their shock at what came out of the vehicle was just as intense as what they'd experienced from the manamobile's kamikaze strike.

"Now then... It looks like my plan succeeded."

A beautiful girl stepped out of the vehicle. Her braided hair swayed in the wind, and her delicate and shapely face surveyed the area. Her maid outfit looked totally out of place; she would've been more at home inside a palace attending to some noble.

"It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance, everyone."

The girl bowed with refined mannerisms, as if she couldn't bring any shame to her master. She'd practiced this gesture so she wouldn't seem out of place, so she could mix into human society and remain by her beloved master's side. She was so elegant that it was hard to imagine her as the one responsible for so recklessly crashing a vehicle into an armed formation. This discrepancy brought all the soldiers' thoughts to a halt.

"My name is Rose," she said with confidence, raising her head. "I am my

master Majima Takahiro's second servant, and his shield."

Her smile was strong, as if to show that this was the point of pride that supported her existence.

"I have come to protect my beloved."

What once was nothing more than a wooden puppet now looked like a flower in full bloom. Beauty wasn't all there was to this flower either. She had thorns to protect what was dear to her.

She reached into her apron pocket and delicately pulled out an unbecoming and enormous battle-axe.

"Allow me to say this beforehand."

She slammed the haft of her axe against the ground with a thud. When she next spoke, her voice carried far and wide.

"All those who have lost the will to fight, cast aside your weapons and flee. I have no intention of chasing you down."

She was fighting only to protect. She wielded a weapon, but she was a shield—nothing more, nothing less. Rose understood this well. Actually, she wanted it to be like that. Whether or not to forgive an enemy was for her master to decide; she only had to think of how to protect him. She didn't need any other thoughts.

"Prepare yourselves."

With loyalty and yearning burning in her heart, the puppet threw herself into battle.

Chapter 11: The Puppet's Way of Fighting Rose's *POV*

With my battle-axe in hand, I charged right into the center of the enemy army. Everyone around me was hostile; I stood completely isolated in a needle-sized hole in their formation. I'd long made my resolve, and it was far too late to consider retreating.

"A battle of attrition, I see," I muttered to myself as I stared at the sea of soldiers and dived in fearlessly. "I'll force my way through!"

I swung my axe and mowed the enemy soldiers down. My axe's large half-moon blade opened a path before me. Screams and bellows danced in the air.

"Fuck! What's with this thing?!"

"What strength! Don't be deceived by its appearance!"

"She said she's a servant?! Wait, that's a monster?!"

The soldiers raised their voices in disbelief. Yes, I was a monster. My body imitated a human's, but my true nature was a puppet. I wasn't much to speak of among our group, but compared to humans, I was physically strong. It was a big mistake to believe that was all there was to me, though.

"Hyaaaah!"

I let out a spirited roar and unleashed my axe. I remained aware of its center of gravity, matched its movements to my footwork, and put all my weight behind it. Centrifugal force carried the weapon's mass and slammed it into my foes.

My master hadn't been the only one to take lessons from Shiran, who was a master of many weapons. Fortunately, the way my body moved was very close to the way a human's did, so I could implement Shiran's techniques. I was nowhere close to replicating her exquisite sword skills, of course, but even learning the basics had made a huge difference. My strikes were inconceivable

compared to the days when I'd relied on brute strength. Now, I could crush a metal breastplate with ease. Shields didn't make a difference either. When I swung with abandon, I cleaved through several enemies at once.

I ignored the pained moans behind me and attacked my next enemy. I didn't bother finishing off those I'd defeated, but that wasn't out of mercy. If I stopped to do so, I'd be overwhelmed by the surrounding enemies in no time.

My outlook for this battle wasn't positive. My enemy was the Maclaurin Provincial Army, after all. Even if they'd split into two forces, their numbers were still vast. My initial attack had been flashy, but it'd only taken out twenty men at most. I didn't have a precise count of their numbers, but that was minuscule in the grand scheme of things.

Regardless, that didn't matter. I knew that before starting this, so that was why I'd charged in with as much flair as possible. My goal had been to agitate the enemy, and I'd succeeded at that.

The enemy was slow to react. Taking advantage of that, I needed to rile them up as much as I could. The longer I stalled them, the more likely it was for my master and everyone else to get away. That meant I didn't have time to finish my enemies off, but that wasn't a problem.

For example, say one soldier out of a hundred died. The group would still function. Say thirty of them were injured, though. It would take time for them to regroup. That pretty much described the current situation.

In a sense, it was more efficient to injure as many enemies as I could rather than to slow down and fatally wound fewer of them. I had to drag this fight out for as long as I could. Even if my enemies didn't die, I had to survive too. I persuaded myself that that was all there was to this as I scattered the soldiers before me. I then saw a group charging toward me.

"That's as far as you go!" the man at the front—probably a squad captain or something—yelled, and he attacked me with steely determination. "I'll stop you right here!" he roared, his subordinates close behind him.

"No, I won't be stopped."

His spirit was commendable, but I couldn't afford to be defeated. I pulled a

knife from my apron with my empty hand, and keeping up that momentum, I threw it at him. This was another technique Shiran had taught me. Although, unlike my axe, I wasn't really familiar with this yet. I could only pull it off at close range when aiming at something right in front of me.

"This is nothing!" he yelled, the knife bouncing off his shield.

"Not like that, it isn't."

I hadn't thought that a little knife would do anything against an enemy squad. That was why there was a trick to it. The imitation runestone embedded in the butt of the knife's grip emitted a powerful light and shattered.

"Whoa?!"

It burst with an ear-shattering boom.

"I'm holding nothing back," I declared.

This was a derivation of my combat fireworks. By expending an imitation runestone in one use, it could momentarily manifest great power. It didn't use multiple imitation runestones in a series, so it didn't have the pure destructive force of combat fireworks, but it was much easier to pull out and use in the moment. My reserves of imitation runestones were low after using them on my combat fireworks the other day, so I'd only managed to prepare a few of these, but I'd decided not to be stingy.

The small explosion knocked the squad off-balance. Using that chance, I charged in, the shock wave blowing back my hair. I kicked the officer and crushed his men, then continued my advance. I'd broken through.

I smiled bitterly. "So this is the Maclaurin Provincial Army."

A wall of spears stood before me. A formation of men were ready in an organized row, blocking my way. Unlike the other soldiers until now, these ones were fully prepared for battle.

"Ugh! Don't let it through!" the man I'd kicked yelled behind me.

It seemed his squad had bought the small amount of time they needed for their troops to form a spear wall. They'd adapted faster than I thought they would. With their formation in place, it would be much harder to break

through. That said, if I lost my momentum, it would only give my enemies more breathing room.

“I’ll be breaking through.”

That was the only way. I threw another knife, and the imitation runestone within exploded. The enemy was ready for it after seeing it once already, so it was less effective, but it was better than nothing. Using the explosion as a smoke screen, I charged straight in.

“Guh...”

I toppled a group of them with my axe, but I had to stop. I couldn’t break through. I thought of launching a second attack, but many spears lunged at me before I could. There were too many to dodge, so I stopped them by holding up both arms. The steel tips sank into my skin.

“Stab it to death!”

“Ugh...”

At this rate, things were going to get worse. I twisted my body with all my strength and yanked the spears out of my arms. My body was made of wood, so I shed no blood; the broken fragments merely fell to the ground. I stepped back to get out of range of the spears—my first step backward since the beginning of the battle. Immediately following that, I heard a voice behind me.

“Got you!”

The squad I’d gotten through earlier had caught up to me, but I didn’t have time to deal with them.

“Out of the way!” I yelled.

I played another of my hidden hands. I spun like a top and threw a ball from my apron pocket. It was a white sphere about the size of a human head—one of the many magic tools I’d created. Inside was an imitation wind runestone. The ball exploded above the soldiers’ heads, scattering something white all over them.

“Whoa?!”

“Wh-What the hell is this?”

Sticky spider threads enveloped them. This magic tool used a cocoon made of Gerbera's threads, and inside was an imitation wind runestone that scattered the threads over a wide area. It wasn't much use against strong enemies, but it was effective at stalling.

After confirming that the soldiers behind me had slowed down, I turned around again, facing the spear wall again and recommencing my attack. I mowed them down. Screams rose, spears plunged into my body in retaliation, and I fell back.

"Not yet... Not yet!" I shouted, charging in for a third attempt. This time, the line broke. "Made it!" I tore a hole through the formation, advanced forward, and... "Well, I figured that'd be the case."

Another squad was ready to meet me. The formation I'd broken through was nothing more than the front line. The provincial army still stood there as if nothing had happened. There was a terrifying power in numbers.

My efforts were like spilling a cup of ink into an enormous lake. The heat of my hard-fought battle would eventually vanish in vain, leaving not so much as a blotch behind. I felt the cold realization of how fruitless this endeavor was.

What's more, the enemy was regaining their composure. This time, there was a fair bit of space between me and the next wall, which was no coincidence. I couldn't attack unless I closed the distance.

I broke into a dash at full speed, but it would still take me a few seconds to get there. In that time, I was the only one in this empty area, and the enemy wasn't going to let such a chance pass.

"Fire!"

Arrows and magic flew in from the rear guard. I'd predicted this, but I couldn't do anything about it. I couldn't dodge everything.

"Ugh...!"

Arrows pierced me all over, and I even took a direct hit from magic. I heard a terrible sound come from the arm I used to shield myself. I just barely managed to keep running. I forced my way through the rain of magic and arrows, and slammed my axe against the enemy formation.

“Don’t falter! Thrust!”

Spears counterattacked and sank into my skin. The man leading this squad laughed.

“You put up quite the fight, but this is the end!”

His glee was understandable. The arm I’d used to block the spears was trembling, and I couldn’t put much strength into it. Beneath my burned glove, my arm was badly cracked. Several of my fingers had fallen off. I couldn’t even wield a knife properly.

My other arm wasn’t much better. A spear had lodged itself into the ball joint at my elbow. I couldn’t swing a weapon like this, let alone fight. I could only give up. Normally—for a human—that would be the case.

“Not yet.”

My body was that of a puppet and a shield. I was a girl, yet a monster. This still wasn’t over: I wouldn’t let it end like this.

“I’m sparing no expense today.”

I’d decided to use everything I had at hand for my beloved. I would continue fighting until I was reduced to wood chips, and this was my secret weapon for accomplishing that.

“Combat matryoshka.”

This magic tool was named after a doll fashioned to look like a girl. In short, it turned a puppet girl—it turned me—into a magic tool.

“Exchanging.”

I pulled the spears out of my arms, jumped back, and gathered my mana. In an instant, my cracked left arm split apart. It hadn’t broken; it’d split into two pieces as if by design. I’d planted an imitation runestone inside for “storage.” In the same instant that my arm split apart, the imitation runestone deactivated, and the item it’d been storing came flying out. It was a spare arm.

“Reconnecting.”

The arm popped back into my shoulder socket with a clunk. I caught the axe

that had fallen from my broken hand in midair with my new limb. Everything down to my fingertips felt fine. I was mobile. Back to perfect condition, I readied my axe once more.

“Exchange complete. Recommencing battle.”



The soldiers watched in shock, which was a normal reaction. The foe that was supposed to be worn down was back in working order in the blink of an eye. Not even healing magic could have achieved this.

In contrast, I faced them with a smile. “My apologies, but this is how my body works. This still isn’t over.”

My body was a shield meant to protect my master, and I didn’t mind being reduced to wood chips for him. I’d made that decision, and I’d come this far. This magic tool made that oath a reality.

To dive into the details, each spare arm used the same imitation runestones as magic bags. We’d been putting bags inside bags all this time, so the theory was well proven already. It’d taken some time to get the combat matryoshka to this stage, but now it was ready for use in combat. As a result, I could instantly repair damage to my limbs.

“This body is my master’s shield. No matter how many times it breaks, I’ll continue fighting.”

I’d said that from the very beginning. This was a battle of attrition. I had over one hundred sets of spare limbs. If a thousand soldiers stood in my way, I would face them a hundred times over. My wooden body felt no physical fatigue, and with thoughts of my master close at heart, my spirit would never break. This fight was still nowhere close to over.

Chapter 12: The Puppet's Hard-Fought Battle

Rose's POV

How long had this battle gone on? I'd long lost my sense of time. The fighting simply went on and on.

"Hyaaaah!"

I weaved through the downpour of magic and arrows, then kicked off the ground. I slammed my axe into the line of shields in front of me and ate the spears that struck back in retaliation. When I judged that my limbs couldn't keep going, I swapped them out and went at it again.

Over, and over, and over...

If my body were flesh and blood, no matter how strong my muscles were, I'd have long reached the limits of my stamina and fallen to my knees.

I'd broken through enemy formations twenty times now, but the enemy's numbers remained strong. There were too many of them for me to make a noticeable dent in the first place. Additionally, I hadn't delivered a killing blow to the majority of those I'd defeated, so the army's battle lines were gradually recovering. That didn't really matter to me, though. My goal wasn't to annihilate them. I was here to obstruct their march and buy time.

The enemy army was exhausted. Many soldiers suffered from injuries, and their fatigue was building up. Even if they weren't dead, many had broken bones and such, rendering them incapable of fighting.

I was succeeding at buying time. This was reflected in how long I'd spent here, but it was reinforced by all the medical treatment that would have to be administered before the enemy could begin marching again.

I was spent in equal measure, of course. The provincial army had long recovered from the shock of the initial attack, and the fighting had only intensified since. I'd consumed many of my spare parts and only had thirty left.

Although, from another perspective, I could reset my condition thirty *more* times. I could keep this fight going for a while longer. It wasn't a bad pace either. Actually, to be frank, this pace was far better than I'd expected.

My combat matryoshka had prolonged the fighting more than my initial projections had suggested. The fighting techniques I'd learned from Shiran had been extremely effective too. After putting all of this to use in real combat, I now understood. Given a set of extremely strict conditions—having plenty of time to prepare and facing a foe who relied entirely on numbers in a battle of attrition—my aptitude for combat was fairly high.

So long as I had the time to get my spares ready, I could instantly recover damage to my body. I had many spare weapons and an abundance of disposable magic tools. As a puppet, I never ran short of breath, I never fatigued, and injuries never affected my endurance.

Faced with a large army like this one, only Lily would be better suited to fight. No, in terms of pure potential, maybe one other could, but in any case, it didn't change the fact that I was very well equipped for this situation.

Hypothetically speaking, if our group had been in perfect condition, we could have clashed against the entire Maclaurin Provincial Army head-on. Naturally, with our master unconscious and the village elves accompanying us, compounded by the fact that Lily and Gerbera had to remain dedicated to healing and defense, that was nothing more than a pipe dream.

Things right now were going well enough that I could consider such thoughts. If I just held out a little longer, it would be difficult for the provincial army to catch the others within the day. I just had to hold out a little longer. Once that was over... Once it was over, what then?

A thought suddenly bubbled in my mind.

Things are going better than expected. In that case...maybe, just maybe...

Maybe I would be able to escape too.

It was a tempting thought. I'd come here prepared to die, but it wasn't as if I wished to die. I wanted to live from the bottom of my heart, which was why such thoughts came to mind.

My combat matryoshka had proven more effective in battle than expected. It was possible that, by the time I exhausted the enemy to the point that I'd projected, I would still have spares left over. Could I expect the same effectiveness from them when running away? Once I was done doing what I had to, I could possibly get away from this battlefield.

It didn't matter if I had to use my entire stockpile. The opportunity to return to those dear to me existed. My sisters would surely be angry with me once they learned of what I'd done. Mana might even cry. As for my master... He was very kind to us, and in certain ways, he was very soft on others, but after I had done something so selfish, he might get rather angry with me. He might even scold me.

Aah, how happy a thing that would be. If I could meet my beloved once more and face his anger, an anger that came from how dearly he thought of me, there would be no greater blessing. I wanted to go back and apologize. I wanted to keep saying sorry until he forgave me. And once he did, I wanted to tell him how I felt. I wanted to convey the feelings I'd finally discovered.

With such wonderful ambitions filling my heart—a crushing blow hit my body, shattering those ambitions to pieces.

“Gah?!”

I screamed, and my body creaked. I heard the sound of a collision accompanied by cracking wood. I'd received an awful blow while in the middle of combat. Unable to withstand it, I threw my head back, barely managing to perceive a bundle of rocks. This was magic. I'd been attacked by a barrage of magic rocks.

“Ugh, gah...”

The impact blew me back. I slammed against the ground, and an instant later, I twisted my body and landed on my feet.

“That was...too close.”

My right arm, which I'd brought up to block the attack at the last second, was pulverized. My torso had been so close to being destroyed. It'd been pure luck that I'd managed to block it. I immediately used my combat matryoshka to

replace my damaged arm, then pulled a new axe from my apron to replace the one I'd dropped.

"That just now was..."

I shuddered as I recalled the blow. It had such force behind it. It'd also been extremely accurate, despite the fact that I'd been in combat against other soldiers. It wasn't an attack after they suppressed me and pinned me in place; a sniper had dealt that blow. In that sense, it was very clear now. My naive ambition was impossible.

"I was hoping to avoid encountering you. How unfortunate..."

What I'd feared had finally joined the fray.

"The Holy Order."

A portion of the soldiers' formation opened up, and a group of knights clad in heavy armor stepped forth.



"Leave this to us."

Twenty knights appeared before me. There weren't all that many of them, but they weren't the same as regular soldiers. The knights affiliated with the Holy Order were all descendants of saviors—those of blessed blood. They had fostered their talents through training since early childhood, so they were all experts in combat. In certain cases, they had even inherited their ancestor's powers, making them the worst of enemies.

I readied my axe and turned to face them. I started by evaluating the possibility of escaping. I wasn't here for honor or glory, so when faced with formidable enemies, it was best to avoid contact with them to prolong the battle.

I was forced to discard that notion, though. The soldiers surrounding us were in the way. They formed shield walls that would require two or three strikes to break. I couldn't possibly leave myself open to the knights in such a manner.

This could've been avoided had I thrown myself into a melee with the soldiers before this, but now that they'd launched a preemptive strike and caught me in

this net, nothing could be done about it. My only choice was to face the knights in battle.

“It took so long that I was starting to think that the Holy Order wasn’t accompanying this force. It seems I was too optimistic.”

“The reason we took so long was because you were doing so well,” one of the knights responded. I hadn’t expected an answer, so I was a little surprised. “We were late to react due to the unexpected attack. Because of that, information on what was going on was in disarray, and as a result, it took us a fair amount of time to capture you with you on the move the entire time.”

The man’s gaze was steady. Judging by how he was using this opportunity to talk, he was likely the officer in charge of these knights. Now that I thought of it, his voice sounded like the one who’d said, “Leave this to us.”

“I never thought anyone would charge into the entire army unaided. What beautiful devotion.”

In contrast to his flattering words, his voice had no real emotion in it. He sounded detached. I wasn’t one to talk, but this man was like a puppet. He didn’t have the ambition suitable for a member of the elite Holy Order. That didn’t mean I could be careless around him, however.

“Allow me to praise your hard-fought battle. It was splendid. Regrettably, that comes to an end now.”

In concert with his speech, half the knights stepped forward. The remaining half started casting support magic on the front rank—the specialty fighting style of the Holy Order. During the defensive battle at the reclamation village, I’d avoided this by launching a preemptive strike using combat fireworks.

“Go.”

In accordance with the puppetlike man’s command, the knights came rushing in. These were the greatest knights in the world—excluding exceptions like Shiran. It was my first time witnessing their movements up close.

“Guh...”

I blocked the first blow with my axe’s haft. One beat later, another knight

delivered a thrust at my flank. I jumped back to dodge it, then felt an impact against my right arm. A third knight had attacked me.

My axe-wielding hand went flying off at the wrist. They got me good. I immediately began exchanging parts, but right before I could, I stooped over.

“Eat this!”

A sweeping blow passed right over my head. Having lost my right hand, I had no weapon, so I had no time to straighten myself back up. I pushed forward instead, tackling the knight who’d swept his sword above me. I picked him up off the ground and thrust him against the next knight who tried to attack me.

That was when I finally managed to replace my right arm. I didn’t have time to pull out another weapon, though. Another knight was before me, and I thrust my empty hand at his throat. He blurted a “Hrgh,” but that was it. I’d thrust hard enough to break a normal human’s neck, but I hadn’t done much damage to him—a blessing he received from the magic boosting his physique.

The knight recoiled and stepped back, and two other knights came between us to take his place. Using the small break between attacks, I shoved a hand into my apron pocket and pulled out a knife, throwing it at one of the knights.

He dodged the projectile, but the imitation runestone in the butt of the grip exploded behind him, throwing him off-balance. This was my chance to get a strike in, but I wasn’t able to. The other knight thrust his sword at me. I tried to dodge, but he was too fast.

“Gah...”

The thick blade plunged into my waist, which was bad. I had no way of replacing my torso using my combat matryoshka. In other words, I couldn’t swap it out on the spot. Until now, I’d gotten by by sacrificing my arms and legs whenever an attack was beyond my ability to block or dodge, but now an attack had finally gotten through my defenses.

They continued coming at me. My left leg flew off from the thigh down, and they severed my brand-new right arm at the elbow. The moment I stopped moving, a stone bullet flew in from the rear. Having lost the support of one leg, I tilted over, and the knights closed in.

“Not yet!”

I spat out what I'd been hiding in my mouth. It was a small imitation runestone. I didn't use my mouth to vocalize words; I'd simply trained my lips to move so that it looked natural when I spoke. I'd been able to speak back when my face was no more than a smooth surface, so it was a simple matter to hide a weapon inside my oral cavity.

The imitation runestone exploded, catching me in the blast as well. I tumbled across the ground, escaping certain death. Even as thin plumes of black smoke billowed from my body, I sprang back to my feet. When I did, I stood face-to-face with a stumbling knight who'd been stopped by the explosion. I was long done replacing my damaged arm and leg as I came down upon him.

“You goddamn monster!”

The knight reacted with incredible speed and intercepted me with his sword, his swing backed by the support of magic. I sacrificed my left hand to catch it.

“Wha—?!”

I grasped the blade and pulled him toward me. I pulled out another knife and rammed it into his throat. His eyes shot wide open, and after a short scream, he collapsed backward.

“I did it...”

I defeated one. After such a long exchange of blows, I'd finally got one. I didn't have time to bask in my victory, however. I swapped out my left arm once more, then pulled out another axe.

I had a rough idea of the difference in strength between us. After recovering from a single misstep that would've taken me out of the fight, I'd barely managed to defeat one of them. What's more, I'd used up many resources to do so. The Holy Order was strong. The strength of an individual knight was far beyond that of an average soldier. Because of the magic reinforcing them, it was best to assume that each was at least as strong as me.

The only reason I could contest them on even ground was because I could sacrifice my limbs. That said, at the current rate, I would run out of spares at a terrifyingly fast pace. It was a question of whether my stores would be depleted

before my enemies were defeated. In either case, this was the end for me.

It turned out that I wasn't going to meet my master again. I'd gotten a glimpse of a cruel dream earlier. I laughed at myself, then focused on the fight. I'd been prepared for this from the very beginning.

Even if I was durable, I didn't have explosive power like Lily or Gerbera. The moment the Holy Order took the field, I knew it would end like this. It was disheartening that my dream would remain unfulfilled, but I wasn't shocked, and it didn't cloud my fighting spirit.

"Now that it's come to this, I'll take as many of you with me as I can."

I readied my axe and spread my feet shoulder width apart, glaring at my opponents carefully. I was prepared to deal with any manner of attack.

"I see... You're stronger than I thought," one of them said.

It was the puppetlike man again. He didn't order his men to attack; he just kept his gaze steady on me. On the other hand, the other knights stepped a fair distance back. It was as if they were yielding the stage to him.

"The dangerous ones are the spider, slime, and dragon. That's what I was told. You're an unexpectedly formidable enemy. If handled poorly, you might take us with you to hell."

He kept acknowledging my strength. There was something ominous about his demeanor. The atmosphere he clad himself in reminded me of something. Yes, now I remembered. He had the fathomless accumulation of mana visitors like Iino Yuna and Fukatsu Aketora exhibited.

"I suppose I'll have to reveal my hidden hand as well."

His "hidden hand" was a reproduction of a power once used to save the world. Those who inherited such power were called beloved of blessed blood.

The man planted his palm against the ground and said, "Angel Puppets." A pillar of light then shot up into the air.

Chapter 13: The Puppet's Struggle *Rose's POV*

Naked human shapes appeared out of the light. They were smooth from top to bottom, with no distinctive sexual features. All of their bland faces were identical. The sight seemed eerie and divine in equal measure, and the words of the man who'd created them stimulated my memory.

"Angel Puppets...?"

I'd heard that term before. That was the name of the ability that one of Travis's subordinates had used. My master, Lily, and Gerbera had witnessed it for themselves. When Shiran lost her mind and went on a rampage after seeing her home being attacked, one of the knights of the Holy Order had employed this.

"So you survived," I said. "I didn't see them on the battlefield, so I was under the impression you were already dead."

During the defensive battle that followed, these angel puppets hadn't appeared on any of the battlefields. I'd figured their user had died before being able to put them to use. Many knights had died during Gerbera and Lily's surprise attack in the forest, and a few casualties had occurred when Lobivia knocked down the house. Even I'd blown up several knights with combat fireworks. Therefore, it was more than possible that he had died during one of those incidents.

That wasn't the case, though. He was alive and now stood in my path.

"I'm Ottmar Valhalder of the Angel Puppeteer. I'll be using my trump card too," he said, then commanded his puppets, "Go."

The puppets broke into a run, looking as if they were gliding across the ground. They were armed with spears that had a winglike design. Once they closed the distance, they silently thrust their weapons at me. I swung my axe in response, repulsing their spear tips.

Due to the traits of our weapons, I had much more mass behind my blows,

but the enemy came out with the upper hand after our clash nonetheless. The spears that should've been halted drew a sharp arc through the air and came back at me. Seeing such spearmanship, I immediately knew that these were no simple foes. Furthermore, they weren't acting as independent entities. The three angel puppets coordinated as if they were one, surpassing even the knights' teamwork.

"Ugh..."

I dodged, parried, and blocked. Nevertheless, I couldn't keep up, and their spears shaved away at my body. They were far stronger than I'd heard.

Lily and Gerbera had told me that they'd easily defeated the angel puppets they encountered. These weren't anywhere near that weak, though. Did it have to do with numbers? They had faced twenty puppets at once, but there were only three here now. Maybe having fewer puppets made the individual specimens stronger, or maybe Ottmar was using stronger specimens and could only bring out a few of them. I didn't know the details of his ability, so I couldn't say for sure, but either way, it meant he'd adapted to the situation at hand.

What's more, the knights I'd just been fighting were watching the battle unfold, looking for any opening. I had no choice but to remain focused on them too. I was at a disadvantage here, and the one thing I had going in my favor was my combat matryoshka.

Every time my limbs were quickly reduced to tatters, I swapped them out. By doing so, I just barely managed to keep the battle going. Unfortunately, I hadn't made any attacks of my own between taking on the perfectly coordinated puppets and making sure not to give the knights any openings.

My axe wasn't enough. Realizing this, I pulled out a knife. I was running out due to the long battle, but it was worth the sacrifice. I charged the knife with mana and threw it. Ready to use the opening from the explosion, I tightened my grip on my axe—

"Wha—?!"

The puppets charged through the blast. By repulsing the knife with their spears, they'd flung the explosion as far away as possible, keeping its effect to a minimum. The puppets were a little off-balance, but the opening this yielded

lasted no longer than a second.

The angel puppets looked far more human than I did. They had nothing like ball joints anywhere on their bodies, but they were simply manipulated puppets. They were mere objects. Conceptually, they weren't all that different from projectile weapons.

They closed the distance as if nothing had happened and thrust their spears. I swung my axe in response, but my stocks were running low. All the resources I'd stockpiled, everything I'd built up over so much time, my very existence, was being shaved away bit by bit. They were driving me to the very end of my rope.

"Gah...?!"

A blow struck my waist. At this rate, I would die. I could sense it.

"Aaaah!"

The impending danger riled me up. I exchanged my limbs and stepped forth. One could say that this was reckless of me and that the price for this action would be severe.

"G-Gah..."

I repelled one attack but ate the others head-on. My left bicep and right knee were destroyed. I was prepared for this, so even as pieces of my limbs scattered about, I kept pushing forward. The means to survival was now open to me.

"Right...there!"

Even as I pitched forward pathetically, I got in range of one of the puppets.

"You won't get away!"

I hefted my axe with one hand and swung hard as if to tear out my own arm. My weapon drew a large arc through the air, aimed right at the puppet's torso. Its left arm shattered with a shrill noise like breaking porcelain.

"Ah..."

My axe hadn't reached the puppet's body. It had defended itself by sacrificing an arm. For a human, losing a limb would be severe enough to render them immobile, but to a puppet, it was nothing more than losing a part of its body.

I knew this very well. I'd been doing the same thing this whole time, after all. Now they were doing it back to me. That was how I was able to predict the severe attack that followed. However, even though I knew it was coming, I didn't have enough time to react.

The one-armed puppet lunged with its spear, its tip shattering the left side of my face. By the time I realized this, the two uninjured puppets closed in.

"Gah...?!"

One thrust carried plenty of momentum, piercing my shoulder, and with my joint destroyed, my left arm fell off. The damage was serious. I could use my combat matryoshka to replace a damaged arm, but I couldn't do anything when the joint was missing. The remaining attack pierced deep into my waist, making a horrible sound.

"U-Ugh..."

A crack ran down my body from the perforation. I'd taken a critical hit on a spot that had suffered several blows already. If anything else went even slightly wrong, my entire torso would shatter. The damage to my body was too severe, and I couldn't get my legs to move. The enemy would not let this chance pass either.

"Got you!"

Coordinating with the puppets, one of the sharp-eyed knights to the side leaped into action. He was surely going to smash my body to bits with his sword and incapacitate me.

It was all over...

"Aaaaaaah!"

I could never accept that.

In a battle between puppets who neglected any damage they received, I'd lost the only advantage I had. However, I possessed something a simple puppet didn't—this emotion in my heart. It still wasn't over. I gripped my axe in my hand with all my might and swung upward diagonally at the knight who'd leaped at me. Under the impression that I could no longer move in my current

state, he took the blow defenselessly.

The knight collapsed with a spray of blood, a look of shock frozen on his face. I stopped paying him any mind and rotated my axe overhead. Both sides were ignoring the damage they'd taken in this brawl. This time it was my turn. I brought my axe down into the head of the puppet before me. The half-moon blade cleaved it in two from its cranium all the way to its chest. I didn't have the time to yank my weapon back out, so I let go.

In human terms, perhaps this was much like summoning great strength when facing a raging fire. My broken body moved better than ever before. Nevertheless, my actions had been so reckless that I heard creaking coming from my tortured joints. At this rate, I was liable to destroy myself. I didn't care, though, and spun on the spot.

"Out of the way!"

I slammed my fist into the face of the puppet who'd dismembered me. My hand shattered, and the puppet somersaulted backward. In its place, the third puppet lunged at me with its spear. I blocked with my one arm and pulled it in.

"Aaaaah!"

I headbutted it right in the face with everything I had. I heard a destructive crash, and the puppet toppled over with a broken skull. I also fell in the opposite direction from the recoil.

"Gah."

I slammed into the ground with my back, and for an instant, my consciousness went hazy.

"Ugh, aah..."

Because I'd been using my mana so extravagantly, the reserves I needed to maintain my own being were finally reaching depletion. Or maybe all the damage I'd taken was now threatening my very existence. Not that I cared either way. I started to get back on my feet, but my body creaked all over as I did.

"Not...yet..."

I tried to stand, but I couldn't manage to do so. Because I'd pushed myself too hard, the crack running across my waist had gotten larger. Regardless, I had to get back up. I still had something I had to protect.

"I can...still fight..."

I saw the fallen spear nearby that'd come loose from my body when I tumbled over. I exchanged my broken arm for a new one and picked up the weapon. Using it as a cane, I stood up straight.

"I can still..."

I couldn't finish that sentence. In the next instant, an airborne rock shot right through me.

Chapter 14: An Unfulfilled Wish *Rose's POV*

I couldn't tell which way was up or down. The broken fragments of my shattered body danced in the air among a cloud of dust.

"Ah..."

Before I knew it, I was on the ground staring up at the sky. That was when I finally understood that a soaring rock had blown me away. I tried to stand back up immediately. So long as I was on my feet, I could keep fighting. I could keep protecting what was dear to me. Sadly, it was only then that I noticed.

"Aah..."

I had nothing from the waist down. Two rocks had hit me, and one of them had gone right into my waist. Brittle from the crack already there, it shattered completely, sending my lower half flying off somewhere. I couldn't restore this kind of damage on the spot.

Even so, if I had at least one arm... The moment I shifted my focus to that thought, I realized that I couldn't move my right arm. The other rock had crashed into my bicep, pulverizing everything in the region of my shoulder. I couldn't even make it budge.

As I came to understand my current situation, footsteps drew nearer to me, signaling the end.

"How surprising. To think you're still alive."

It was Ottmar. The other knights weren't with him, but a puppet remained by his side. This puppet was far larger than the ones I'd broken. Had he created another one?

"I'll give you my honest praise. I didn't think you'd exhaust me this much."

He looked somewhat pale. The fight had apparently taken a lot out of him. Creating these puppets must've taken a significant amount of mana.

"But now it's over."

The puppet leaned over and grabbed me by the collar. Having lost half my weight, it easily lifted me into the air. I couldn't resist it. It then held my tattered body up high for all to see, and Ottmar held his naked blade toward the heavens.

"Behold! Evil has been vanquished!" he yelled, puffing out his chest with pride as he boasted of his achievement to all present. "Righteousness has prevailed!"

A cheer of joy broke out over the area.

"The Holy Order has avenged us!"

Because of the hard battle they'd been forced into, the taste of victory was all the sweeter. A shock wave of delight spread through the Maclaurin Provincial Army like a bomb blast.

"Praise the Holy Order!"

"Glory to the Maclaurin Provincial Army!"

Their exaltations resounded all around me. Held up high, I could see far and wide.

"Righteousness, is it?" I muttered to myself.

Ottmar was likely the only one to hear me. He turned up to look at me.

"Did you say something?" he asked.

"Not really. I just reaffirmed the fact that I'm a monster after all."

The reason such an obvious thought came to mind was because I couldn't understand. These people, gushing about their own righteousness, were incomprehensible to me.

"Unlike you, I know nothing of justice," I said. "I just wish to live a quiet life with those dear to me."

The many humans surrounding me were acting so proud of the justice they believed in. I couldn't understand them because I was a monster. In their own way, they were probably right. That was why I had no intention of denouncing them as evil. I saw no reason to in the first place.

"It doesn't matter who is right or wrong. I mean, even if it's an absolute evil to

do so, my wish to protect my master remains unchanged.”

There was no righteousness or justice in this. All I cared about was whether something threatened our peaceful lives or threatened to steal those dear to me.

“Travis attacked us for the sake of his own glory and ambition. As one of his subordinates, I don’t know if you share his motives. Perhaps you act based on the justice you believe in from the bottom of your heart, much like the Maclaurin Provincial Army. None of that matters to me, though. Those are simply your circumstances. From the side being robbed, be it an act of good or evil, both lead to the same conclusion.”

Those were my true feelings.

“You are merely aggressors to us. Nothing more, and nothing less. I know nothing of righteousness or justice. I’m just a monster. Go ahead and laugh if you want.”

I glared down at Ottmar. Even without my arms, even without anything below my waist, even with half my face shattered, I would not yield.

“I absolutely will not allow you to lay a hand on my master. My sisters are of one mind with me. This is the end for me, but our will remains unbroken. Our master will escape your grasp. I believe in this, so this is not my defeat.”

“So that’s your way of life, is it?” Ottmar asked after a pause, then sighed.

He certainly thought I was spouting nonsense. Still, that didn’t matter to me. No matter how much he disdained me, ridiculed me, laughed aloud at me, or anything else, none of it mattered...which was why his next words were so unexpected.

“I won’t laugh,” he said.

“Huh?”

“Your way is right. The desire to protect someone can never be wrong.”

My thoughts came to a halt. I’d never even imagined he’d say anything like that.

“I’m the one stealing from you. In that sense, I’m the inhuman one,” Ottmar

added indifferently.

The more I heard, the more confused I was.

“Why would you say that? I mean, you’re Travis’s—”

“Subordinate?” Ottmar finished for me, nodding. “An understandable suspicion, but also a little off the mark. You’re misunderstanding something.”

“What?”

“As you can see, I possess the power of a savior. I am a beloved of blessed blood,” he said, gesturing to the puppets around him. “There are others like me in the Holy Order, but not all of them have reached the level of being able to apply their powers in the field. A beloved of blessed blood capable of using their power in combat is a rare resource. The Fourth Company of the Holy Order was the smallest of all companies, so only three were affiliated with them.”

“Only three...” I repeated with a frown. “That doesn’t add up.”

In the battle against the Fourth Company, we’d paid particular attention to our most formidable enemies—the beloveds of blessed blood. There was their commander, Travis Mortimer of the Holy Gaze; there was the man who attacked our master the other day, the Battle Ogre Edgar Guivarch; and there was Zoltan Michalek of the All-Seeing Eye.

That made three, and the man before me made four. That didn’t match his claim. But now that I thought of it, he’d said I was misunderstanding something. If so...

“You’re not of the Fourth Company?” I asked.

“Exactly. You said you didn’t see me during the second attack on that village. That’s obvious. I didn’t participate in that attack.”

“But when our group first encountered you in the village, I heard you obeyed Travis’s commands and protected him.”

“At that point in time, it was my mission to obey his orders. That’s all. That’s also why I’m here now.”

He didn’t appear to be lying. I doubted he had any reason to at this point.

Judging by his tone, he was driven by a sense of duty, but that made me feel strangely uneasy.

“So, what?” I said. “Others aside from the Fourth Company of the Holy Order were present at the time?”

My thoughts were in disarray. I told myself to calm down and think it over. Travis had attacked us on an egotistical rampage for the sake of his own ambitions. Or, at least, that was supposed to be the case. However, someone who didn’t work for him had participated as well. If so, one other possibility existed. Someone else’s schemes played a role in the attack Travis’s Fourth Company had launched.

Ottmar was accompanying the Maclaurin Provincial Army on their expedition of justice. I didn’t know what that implied, but I felt as if an unbelievable truth was being unraveled here. I had to tell my master, but I had no way of doing so, and I had no time left.

“You’re here,” Ottmar said, turning to a man who came riding in on a horse flanked by what appeared to be his subordinates.

“Sir Ottmar!” The man dismounted and ran over to us. “I heard you avenged us.”

“Commander Louis, this is the culprit behind the ambush,” Ottmar answered, pointing up at me.

The man was Louis Bard, the commander of this army. From what I could see at a glance, he looked like an honest man. He gave off the impression that he had properly trained to be the commander of an army that protected the people from monsters. If I’d seen him in passing, my impression of him would have been favorable. However, when I looked at him now, his eyes appeared terribly cold.

“This is a monster? To think it imitates the form of a human. How filthy. Why haven’t you killed it?”

“Because this is necessary,” Ottmar replied, indifferent as always. He showed no reaction to the pure contempt in Louis’s voice. “The army is exhausted. I’ve determined that, as its commander, you need to be the one to execute the foe

to raise morale.”

Much as Ottmar implied before, I couldn’t sense anything in him beyond the need to accomplish his mission. Ottmar had no ambition, and he had no sense of justice. He was so inhuman, yet so human at the same time.

“I see, is that so?” Louis said, nodding. “In that case, let’s get right to it.”

He immediately drew his sword. He wanted to be rid of the filth before his eyes as soon as possible. That desire was written all over his face.

Ottmar’s angel puppet held me up in one hand before Louis, who readied his sword. He was probably an excellent swordsman. His stance provided no openings. With my body in its current state, he would definitely break me with a single strike.

“Watch closely!” Louis yelled as if to project his voice to the entire army. “With this blow, I shall purge the evil that threatens our world!”

I couldn’t help but find that exaggerated expression funny. The evil that threatens the world? My lips twitched awkwardly at the thought.

Yes, I knew this already. I’d been prepared for this, but that didn’t mean I could remain emotionless. I was conscious of the soldiers’ gazes all around me. I could feel their heightened expectations. Everyone here wished for my death.

It was a chilling sensation. So many people were around, but I felt as if I were all alone. The desire to see my master swelled in my chest, and I could hear my heart breaking. It was as if this loneliness was gouging out my soul.

Master.

I want to be with you.

I want to see your face.

I want to touch you.

I want to embrace you.

I love you. I love you with all my heart. It hurts so much not to tell you.

“Master...”

The tearful plea I’d tried to hold back all this time came out at the very end.

Surrounded by nothing but enemies, no one would answer my call. That was what I thought, but...

“What the?” Louis cried.

He didn't sound like the man who was moments away from passing judgment on evil. He sounded confused. It was likely the same for everyone else present. I was the only exception, but that wasn't because I was special or anything. I just knew what was happening. This was exactly what I'd feared seeing. It was coming from the man I loved, after all.

“Mist...?” Louis muttered in astonishment.

His figure was already obscured by white fog. Even held up high by the angel puppet, my entire field of vision went white. As far as the eye could once see, a thick veil of mist had fallen over the entire Maclaurin Provincial Army.

“Aah...”

My wish to sacrifice myself to protect my master went unfulfilled. I was desperate and disappointed that I couldn't prevent this situation from happening. The joy that painted over all such emotions was sinful.

“Master...!”

My master had returned to take back what was dear to him.

Chapter 15: A Glimpse of His Destination

A little before that, I remained a captive in the world of light. I kept resisting, but the pain and effort was agonizing.

“Ugh...”

Having invaded my being, Travis leaned over me, his hands around my neck.

“Ha ha ha ha. Serves you right, Majima Takahiro.”

He was no more than a vengeful ghost now, and his twisted smile and hateful speech suited him so well.

“Keep on suffering. Heh, heh heh. Ha ha ha ha ha.”

I tried to peel his fingers off my neck, but I didn’t have any strength in my hands. I forced myself to do it anyway, then heard unpleasant cracking sounds coming from all over my body.

In this world, the light projection of my body was covered in small cracks. I’d gotten them when I stopped Shiran from turning fully into a ghoul and when I rescued Lily from Takaya Jun. The cracks were like unhealable scars on my soul, and the sound of them deepening was my soul screaming that I was at my limit.

I continued to resist, right on the edge of my own destruction. It wasn’t just me either. Countless vines stretched across the darkness, trying to hold Travis back. Asarina and Salvia were lending me their strength. Although, even with their help, it wasn’t enough to get me out of this.

I’d gotten the upper hand over Travis at one point, but because I’d pushed myself too hard by using the Misty Lodge out in the real world, I’d lost a lot of my strength in this one. I no longer knew how long I’d spent resisting like this. I’d lost all sense of time, yet the endless suffering had just gone on and on.

Seeing me in agony, Travis laughed, then glanced at Asarina and Salvia. “You two are also quite the nuisance.”

The eyes that had been his namesake were gone, and his body looked like

melted wax, unable to retain a proper form, but even in this state, he continued laughing at my suffering. His repulsive resentment was on full display.

“How about giving up already?” he asked.

“Don’t be stupid,” I replied. I had no intention of ever giving up. “Are you two all right, Salvia, Asarina?”

“Yes... I can keep going.”

“Ssster...”

They sounded exhausted, but their spirits were still strong.

“Thanks,” I said, reassured by this fact. I glared at the villainous face before me. “We haven’t lost, Travis. How about giving up yourself? You can’t even maintain your own form anymore, you know?”

This relic of salvation, Holy Water, certainly had a terrifying effect. Reduced to only a soul, Travis was rampaging inside me to his heart’s content. Still, this couldn’t go on forever.

Travis was like a lit candle at this point; he would eventually burn out and disappear. His body had crumbled a fair amount compared to when he’d first appeared. He seemed more and more like a poorly made clay doll, losing his human shape bit by bit. Perhaps conscious of this, Travis’s face spasmed, but his twisted smile quickly returned.

“Yes. You’re right. It’s only a matter of time now,” he said.

He admitted it, but he wasn’t the type to quietly accept defeat. A hateful grin was still plastered on his face.

“I’ll disappear,” he said. “You’ll survive. I wanted to crush your soul with my own hands, so that’s a bit of a disappointment.”

Travis’s smile only deepened, which made me more wary of him. His expression was brimming with sadistic intent.

“But that doesn’t mean I’ve lost,” he went on, his voice embodying his tenacity. “I haven’t been defeated. Actually, it’s more fun if you survive this.”

“Travis, what’re you—?”

I tried asking what he was getting at, but before I could, something occurred.

“Huh?”

Another light was born inside the darkness, one that wasn't me. To be more precise, it'd always been there, but it was shining brighter than before. I shared this world with my servants, so their lights were always nearby.

The reason I hadn't sensed them until now was because Travis and the power of his Holy Water were getting in the way. His tenacity and undue resentment had blinded me with darkness, but now, a beautiful red light had flared up, piercing through that veil with a special heat that allowed it to reach this far all on its own.

The warmth was so reassuring, yet so fleeting. I knew by instinct that it was the brilliance of a light ready to burn itself out.

“Rose...?”

Perhaps because of the mental path, I could easily guess who it was. The light turned into a projection, and a familiar girl appeared. I was bewildered by the sudden change and found myself captivated by the sight, unable to look away. Rose was smiling so happily.



I'd never seen her like this. She looked so cheerful, as if she'd found her most precious treasure. Her smile was so attractive that any who saw it would be liable to fall in love. There was a brilliance to her that embodied everything about being a young girl.

And her smile was definitely directed at me. Her earnest eyes reflected only my figure. I faintly understood the reason for this, but it didn't make my heart throb. Instead, chills ran through my entire body, because Rose's smile showed her resolve for what was to come.

I had a bad premonition that I was never going to see her again. Her figure then expressed exactly what I was thinking.

"Goodbye, Master."

She spoke words of parting, her gaze heart-wrenching and lonely.

"Wait, Rose. Don't go."

I didn't know what was going on, but my premonition of loss now turned into conviction. It felt as if my heart was being gouged out. I was afraid. In this one instant, I forgot about my pain, my suffering, and everything else.

"Please wait!"

I desperately cried out. I tried to get her to stop what she was doing, but my words didn't reach her. The connection between us was supposed to work both ways, but with this poison eating away at my soul, I didn't have the strength to get my feelings across to her. I couldn't stop her farewell.

"I adore you, even if my body should break."

That was undoubtedly a confession of love, but at the same time, it was a vow to prepare for her own destruction. In all likelihood, Rose was wishing for these blossoming feelings in her heart to reach me, which was what had caused her to appear so brightly here. It was a miracle born of the heart. Her wish had been granted in a way that she probably hadn't even expected herself, but in a sense, this way was far crueler than if her wish had gone unanswered.

"Wait..."

My outstretched hand didn't reach her. My voice couldn't stop her. I had no

way of responding to her feelings. I was powerless, unable to do anything.

“May you have a good life.”

With those last words, Rose’s figure vanished. All that remained was darkness.

“Aaah...”

My thoughts were frozen as I stared into the abyss.

“How gallant,” a poisonous voice said as I stood there in a daze. “Driven into a corner, their destination lost, that girl faces her death.”

Travis theatrically put into words the reality I refused to accept.

“A sacrificial pawn to stall for time, I suppose. Aah, what a tragedy. To meet her end on the battlefield, her fleeting emotions receiving no answer... Like rotting garbage.”

He kept speaking as if to rip my wounds open with all the strength he had.

“And you must live on with her sacrifice. You’ll never recover from the pain of loss. Sorrow will fester in your heart, torturing you for a long, long time.”

He was exactly right. Just this premonition of loss already felt like a hole in my heart. If this became a reality, I would never be able to fill this void in me again. Travis was right in every way. I had no rebuttal, a fact that brought to light something questionable.

“Heh heh. A fitting end for a filthy monster. It must be a nightmare for you. Keep on suffering. Suffer to the day your soul rots away. Heh heh, ha ha. Ha ha ha ha ha!”

Travis kept joyfully laughing and strangling me as I stared expressionlessly at his twisted smile, no longer even conscious of my own pain.

I simply found it strange. Why did this man think I was going to sit back and do nothing? Well, that didn’t matter. I didn’t give a damn about him.

At this point, I completely lost interest in Travis. He was just an obstruction now, an eyesore that was in my way. I had to get him out of here, so I did.

“When I imagine your coming agony, I can’t help but— Aaaaaah?!” In the

middle of his gleeful tirade, Travis suddenly started screaming. “Wh-Whaaaaat?!”

He wailed in disbelief, but that stood to reason. Both his arms had crumbled to pieces at the wrist.

“Shut up already,” I spat. He’d been going on and on and on. It was hard on my ears. “Just shut the fuck up.”

I threw off the fragments of Travis that had been stuck to me and grabbed his face.

“Eek...”

As he finally came to grips with the situation, fear dominated Travis’s features.

“H-How...?!” he exclaimed, unable to understand this development.

I looked at him emotionlessly, then bluntly said, “Do you even need to ask?”

I hadn’t done anything special. All I needed was determination—well, determination equivalent to jumping off a cliff.

“Impossible...” Travis muttered, finally realizing what was happening.

Sounds of destruction echoed through the world of light. The small cracks running all over my body snapped and crackled as they turned into deep crevices. I felt the damage I was doing to myself, but I’d already known this would happen.

In exchange for the power I’d gained, I’d lost a big piece of myself. Mizushima had already scolded me for this, and Katou had cried at the thought of my losing even more. But from another perspective, so long as I was willing to pay the price, I could gain more from my ability.

“A-Aren’t you afraid?!” Travis wailed. “Y-You’re mad!”

He was missing the point entirely.

“What’re you saying?” I asked, narrowing my eyes. “Of course I’m scared.”

Every second I felt myself breaking apart, fear sent chills through my entire body. The feeling of slowly losing myself was enough to drive me insane. I

wasn't that strong a person, and under normal circumstances, I'd have been shivering, but at this moment, I had no hesitations or regrets.

"S-So why...?!" Travis yelled.

"Isn't it obvious? There's something I'm even more scared of."

I didn't want to lose anyone, not ever again. I didn't want to return to the isolation I'd experienced before meeting everyone. That was the wish that defined me, so no matter how scared I was, I would never hesitate at this stage.

"Get lost, Travis."

I put all my strength into removing the obstruction in my way. As I did, cracks echoed from all over my body. I was destroying myself, but it wasn't just simple loss. The damage to my figure in this world affected Majima Takahiro the human. By strengthening my ability, my soul changed. The true nature of this process wasn't destruction, but transformation. Crack, crumble, break, transform—just like a chick breaking out of its egg, or a butterfly emerging from its cocoon.

Even with no eyes, Travis seemed to see something. Perhaps he saw the destination of my very being. His lips trembled, and when he spoke, there was fear in his voice.

"You damn monster..."

What did he see with those eyeless sockets in his last moments? Whatever it was, it filled him with despair and terror. I didn't really care, and I didn't intend to find out, but it was sure to be the greatest of nightmares, fitting for the end of a villain like Travis.

With that, I crushed what was in my hand.

Chapter 16: Awakening

What had once been Travis was gone, and I was left alone in the darkness. The foreign invader in my world had been defeated, but my body wouldn't stop breaking. The sound of ruin scattered broken fragments like sparks into the void. I didn't try to stop it either. I simply let it happen. I wasn't being negligent or anything, though. I just believed it was necessary.

By doing this, I finally understood. I was losing my memories of my old world, but that wasn't the true purpose of this phenomenon. At the end of all this destruction to my being, I would transform into something else.

Of course, if that happened, nothing of what I was now would remain. It was terrifying, but if I lost absolutely everything, then gained something to make up for all that loss, my wish would be granted. Maybe that wasn't a bad trade, even if "Majima Takahiro" no longer existed at that point.

I wanted to protect everyone. If that wish could be fulfilled, then maybe this was fine. It was who I was by nature, after all. If I kept going and became something that existed only to protect, then—

"You can't, my dear." A presence took shape behind me. "You can't."

Arms reached around me and embraced me.

"Salvia?"

Now that Travis was gone, she'd regained her freedom. Her large breasts sat atop my head from behind. It felt strangely nostalgic.

"You mustn't damage yourself more than this."

It was like she was scolding me, but contrary to her harsh tone, her embrace was so gentle. This brought me a sense of relief, and my overheating thoughts cooled down.

Salvia affectionately stroked my cracked and breaking cheeks with her slender fingers. "You've done enough, my dear. Nobody wishes for more than this."

Yeah, maybe she has a point... I'd lost a fair bit of my being. Everyone would surely grieve if they learned of this. I didn't want that.

"It's all right. If you find yourself lacking in any way, I... No, we will make up for it. There's no need for you to carry this burden all on your own."

"Sster!" Asarina appeared and started gnawing on my ear, purring cheerfully. "Ssster." She then protested with a voice full of displeasure, which calmed my nerves.

"Yeah... You're right."

The destruction and transformation happening to my body settled down. I'd lost so much and been right on the verge of turning into something else entirely, but that was fine with me. I'd gained something to make up for all that loss.

"Sorry for making you two work so hard, Salvia, Asarina."

Travis had been defeated. I didn't need more than that, so continuing would be putting the cart before the horse. Maybe the day would come when that wasn't enough, but that day wasn't today.

"Let's go back," I said.

"Yes, let's," Salvia replied, nodding and giving my head a tight hug.

Maybe she had an inkling of the erroneous thoughts that'd been going through my head. It was as if she had stopped a child from going somewhere dangerous. As her breasts pushed down on my head, I gave her hand a good pat, then began surfacing from the darkness.

Now then, it's time to take back what's dear to me.



I opened my eyes. I was inside the manamobile I'd been sleeping in the last few days. I immediately sat up.

"M-Master?!"

Lily, who was by my side, sounded shocked. She'd been tending to me all this time, and she looked exhausted.

“Sorry for worrying you,” I said, pulling her toward me.



Shivers ran through her entire body. “Master...” Her voice was filled with delight and relief as I pulled her into an embrace.

“I’m okay now,” I said right into her ear, then let her go. I wanted to talk a lot more, but unfortunately, we didn’t have the time for that.

“Ah, you can’t! You just got up,” Lily said in a fluster as I tried to stand.

“Don’t worry.”

I pushed her back as she tried to stop me, then got to my feet. I’d been lying down in here for quite some time, but I managed to get up smoothly. I didn’t feel anything amiss after being poisoned for so long either.

“Huh?” Lily looked at me in astonishment. “No way. No matter how I look at it, to recover that fast is...”

Having been the one to treat me this whole time, she knew exactly how odd this was.

“It’s almost just like me or Gerbera...”

Lily suddenly went pale. She knew about my ability, and she’d been by my side the entire time she’d been treating me, so she probably realized what’d happened.

“Master...” she said with tears in her eyes.

“We’ll talk later,” I said, shaking my head. I had wished for this, and I didn’t regret it. “Come with me. I need to speak with everyone.”

I got out of the vehicle. The moment I did, all eyes fell upon me. Everyone froze, their expressions full of shock.

The first to come to her senses was Lobivia. “Takahiro!” She ran to me ahead of everyone else and leaped into my chest. “Takahiro! Takahirooo!”

Tears quickly formed in the corners of her usually unyielding eyes.

“Thank goodness. I’m so glad. Hic... Waaaah!”

She began crying like a normal child. Bloodstained bandages were wrapped around her all over—proof that she’d kept fighting even after losing her mother and her home. All the tension in her had finally snapped, and she continued

wailing and crying.

“Sorry, Lobivia. I’m fine now.”

I returned her hug and looked at everyone else who’d gathered. Gerbera, Shiran, Katou, Ayame, and Kei were here. Leah and the other elves were also watching me. They were wounded and exhausted, but everyone was all right. However, Rose wasn’t among them.

“O-Oh, you’ve really recovered,” Gerbera said as she drew nearer. “Th-Thank goodness. Really, that’s good...but we can’t rejoice.”

Her relieved expression quickly clouded over. Next to her, Katou was deathly pale, and Kei was hugging Katou’s shoulders. As I glanced their way, Shiran joined the conversation.

“Takahiro, there’s something we need to tell you. I know you’ve just woken up, and it must be difficult to hear this, but—”

“You don’t need to worry about me. Rose set out on her own to stall the enemy, right?” I said, cutting her off.

“So you’re aware...” Shiran said, putting a hand to her mouth. “How?”

“The mental path. I don’t know all the details, though,” I answered, then got straight to the point. “I need to go get Rose. Sorry, but can you explain what happened?”

“That’s...”

“I’ll tell you,” another voice said. “I’m the last one who saw the puppet, after all.”

Berta walked up to me, and the atmosphere around us became tense.

“It happened after we identified what was wrong with the Mist Barrier. The puppet proposed setting some traps to slow the enemy, and she nominated me to stay with her as a guard and a means of transportation, saying she’d catch back up with the group after finishing the necessary preparations. Once we were alone, she told me she’d stay behind. I left her there and came back on my own.”

After she quickly explained the details, Berta narrowed her four eyes.

“You look calm. I figured you’d be resentful.”

“That’s ’cause I can guess Rose’s thought process,” I told her, sighing. If this had been a sudden event, I might’ve been flustered, but I’d seen Rose’s smile in the world of light. “She figured Lily and the others would stop her, so she chose you to go with her. Judging by her personality, she’s really sorry that she used you like that. There’s no point in blaming you for it, Berta.”

“You really do understand her. Even knowing all that, will you still go to the puppet’s side?”

“Yeah. That’s what I’m here for.” I’d paid the price already, so I didn’t hesitate.

“I see. Then there’s no stopping you anymore.”

Berta snorted. She looked unexpectedly happy. She’d been the last to talk to Rose, so perhaps she felt a certain way about this.

“But things aren’t that simple,” Berta said. The atmosphere again became tense. “To get to the puppet, you’ll have to take on the provincial army. They’ve split into two forces, but they still number in the thousands. Furthermore, their pursuit force is still hounding us.”

“Takahiro, Berta has a point,” Shiran joined in. “We were attacked by the pursuit force not too long ago. Berta came back just in time, so we managed to get by, but if we ignore one of the two main army groups, they’ll close in on us too.”

The pursuit force that had been hounding the elves and the two separate forces of the provincial army—we had to deal with all three at the same time. It didn’t need to be said how hard this would be; everyone here had experienced it for themselves. Maybe that was why.

The elves had been silent this whole time, but one of them spoke up.

“Mister Takahiro, may I say something?”

“Leah? What is it?”

Leah smiled, exhaustion evident on her face from the continuous flight. Her husband Melvin walked up to me alongside her.

“There’s one way of resolving this problem,” she said. She was physically drained, but her voice was strong.

“Auntie, that’s...” Shiran started, but Leah ignored her.

“Please don’t mind us and go after Rose,” she said, her serene expression conveying her resolve. “We decided this together after discussing it. Everyone has done so much to try and save us. It’s enough.”

“At this rate, we’ll all go down together,” Melvin joined in. “It seems you’re worried about the pursuit force and the other half of the provincial army, but if not for us, there would be no need to consider such things. Mister Takahiro, you may take your whole group to go get Rose.”

It was, in fact, just as Melvin said. If we were on our own, we would be free to take action. If we left the elves, we could get away with fighting only the main force that Rose was currently engaging. It was a valid plan, but only if I didn’t care about what we’d lose in the process.

“We cannot keep taking advantage of your kindness,” Melvin said. “We will show that we can get through this in our own way.”

They weren’t just going to take it lying down. That said, about the only thing they could do was use those who could fight as sacrificial pawns to allow the others to escape. Having been badly injured in the battle against the provincial army, Melvin knew that already. This was the kind of people they were, so I didn’t hesitate.

“Thank you for the offer,” I said, genuinely happy for their kindness, “but I can’t accept.”

“Mister Takahiro...” Melvin said. Both he and Leah looked perplexed.

“I’ve decided to protect everyone.”

I refused to lose a single soul. I wasn’t going to lose Rose, and I wasn’t going to sacrifice anyone to get her back. I’d decided to do things that way.

“Can you do that?” Melvin asked.

“Not with my own strength,” I answered, shaking my head.

I knew I wasn’t suited to fighting, but there were still things I wanted to

protect. To do so, I'd reached out for anything I could without regard for my own safety. I'd expended myself to my very limits, so what I'd gained was in no way small. The situation had already changed: I'd changed it. If I understood that and cooperated with everyone, we had a chance.

"Let's all get through this together. Please lend me your strength."

Chapter 17: The Change the Boy Brought About

Rose's assault had exhausted the Maclaurin Provincial Army's main force considerably. Nevertheless, she'd been soundly defeated once Ottmar of the Angel Puppeteer joined the fray. Righteousness had prevailed.

Having witnessed this, the soldiers were wildly enthusiastic, so when a blanket of mist fell over the entire region, they were shaken in equal measure. It was so dense that they could only see a scant few meters in front of them. The sudden event had them astir.

"Calm down! Hold your ground!" Louis ordered, stopping his fretful soldiers before their agitation could turn to fear. "It's just a smoke screen! Calm down and do your jobs, and we'll get through this!"

Visibility was very poor, but they weren't wholly blind. Besides, they'd anticipated this. The Holy Order had informed Louis of Majima Takahiro's specialty magic—a fog that hindered one's sight. Louis had also gotten a report from the pursuit force about that one time this had happened and obstructed them. The soldiers had of course also been notified about it.

The unknown was frightening, but it could be surmounted with knowledge. Louis began passing orders to his scattered captains to settle the unrest. He also quickly realized what this implied.

"This magic means Majima Takahiro has arrived. He's supposed to be unconscious from Sir Edgar's attack. How tenacious. Wait, but in that case..."

Louis knitted his brow.

"I see. He abandoned the elves."

Louis easily read the flow of the battle. He knew with certainty that the elves had been pushed to complete exhaustion, and he'd gotten reports that Majima Takahiro's monsters had their hands full just protecting the elves from the pursuit force. There was also the detachment of two thousand men closing in on the elves from the opposite direction. If the enemy had worked out a way to

launch an attack on the main force's three thousand soldiers, they wouldn't be able to protect the elves.

Majima Takahiro had abandoned them.

"Hmph. A filthy fake to the very end," Louis spat, his lips drawing into a thin line. "However, it means all his servants might launch an attack on us in unison."

Louis concluded that his defenses had to be hardened. The soldiers had taken quite a blow due to the chaos and confusion during Rose's assault, and he had to prevent the same thing from happening again.

Louis started considering what orders to pass out. To the very end, he remained vigilant. He had a good idea of how strong Majima Takahiro's forces were based on the information he'd gotten from the pursuit force, so he made the most appropriate decisions to match that intel. He did everything to the best of his abilities.

Nevertheless, Louis's knowledge was limited. He didn't know that things had already changed drastically. Well, to be precise, he knew that a change had occurred. After all, this magic mist signaled that Majima Takahiro had been revived. But Louis didn't consider this as anything more than a boy waking up. He didn't understand how much resolve it had taken to bear this fruit, nor did he know how much this would change things.

Perhaps that was inevitable. In any case, Louis only recognized Majima Takahiro as a fake savior. He never tried to understand the boy's way of life.

A single boy's return changed what was once a hopeless situation. By this time, the first move had already been made.



The detached force that had split from Louis's main group continued their march. Much like the main body of the army, their morale was high. The plan to swing a detachment around to catch Majima Takahiro's party in a pincer attack had ended in vain, but they were going to corner their targets regardless.

Louis's confidant led this force, and there was nothing to criticize about his abilities. Louis could expect the same results he'd get if he were in charge

himself. That was supposed to be the case, and reality reflected this well. Leading a force almost equal to the one Louis commanded...the man found himself suddenly forced into a one-sided defensive battle.

“Harden the line! Mages, prepare to intercept!”

He quickly passed out his orders, and the soldiers looked up at the sky, their faces tense. It was as if they feared something appearing above them, and that fear quickly turned into reality.

“Here it comes!” one of the soldiers cried. He pointed vigorously at a small dot in the sky.

High above the provincial army, something like a pole was falling right at them. Those with terrific eyesight might have been able to identify it as a black spear. It wasn't quite the appropriate shape for throwing, but it flew through the air with terrifying speed and accuracy.

“Now!”

The provincial army's mages unleashed their magic into the sky. The large majority of it was wind magic. Mages were typically trained to use this against monsters who engaged from afar. It wasn't that strong, covering a wider range instead, but arrows or javelins wouldn't be able to get through.

Such was the case, but the black spear maintained its course. An unnatural wind accompanied it, fixing its course, accelerating it, protecting it from magic, and delivering it all the way to its target.

The spear pierced the shield of an unlucky soldier as if it were paper. Not even his armor and flesh impeded it in any way. The weapon smashed into the ground, churning it up and sending the soldiers around it flying into the air indiscriminately. In addition, at the exact point of impact, the magic that had carried the spear burst, scattering blades of wind all over.

The soldiers caught up in the blast screamed. A good fifty meters away, a girl listened to them with her abnormal hearing.

“Mm. Looks like a direct hit.”

Lily nodded, her flaxen hair swaying about. That attack had naturally come

from her. The fight had changed thanks to Majima Takahiro's revival, and one of those major changes was that Lily had returned to the battlefield.

During their entire flight from the enemy, Lily had been dedicated to Majima Takahiro's treatment. That had been a difficult battle in its own right, but now that she'd been released from that duty, she'd regained the freedom to move about.

"Okay, one more time."

Lily grabbed her next projectile from a line of black spears—which would have likely made the poor soldiers of the provincial army go pale—standing in the ground before her.

The job she'd been entrusted with was stalling the Maclaurin Provincial Army's detached force. She was to play it safe, keep her distance, and pin them down by slamming long-distance attacks at them. In a sense, she was giving them a taste of what the pursuit force had subjected the elves to, but much more efficiently. This had to be a nightmare for the provincial army, though.

As for Lily, she didn't see her return to the battlefield as that big of a deal. Having continuously used healing magic for so long, she understood that what mana she had left was unreliable. However, instead of worrying about such objective facts, she understood the situation on a more instinctive level. In short, her return was just one small part of the great change her lover's sacrifice had made. And someone right next to her had received a far greater blessing in the process.

"Shiran, if you will," Lily said.

"Understood," Shiran answered with a brisk and energetic nod. The girl who'd been unable to move properly due to Majima Takahiro's poisoning was nowhere to be seen. "Lily, the same spot will do. I'll make the minute adjustments."

As she spoke, Shiran also gave instructions to her spirit. Through its senses, she had a clear picture of the provincial army's position from far away. She also assisted with Lily's magic to guide her spear to its targets, amplifying its power and accuracy.

“Hyah!”

Lily chucked her spear with vigor. It once more blew away a section of the defending army.

“Another direct hit,” Shiran said. “Splendidly done.”

“It’s all thanks to your help, Shiran.”

That was the fifth spear she’d thrown. All of them had struck down soldiers of the provincial army, but they weren’t actually doing that much damage. Each time a spear pierced through their magic defenses, the magic supporting the projectile weakened. Even disregarding that, each throw could only take out ten people at most, including those who got off with just injuries.

The soldiers couldn’t ignore the spears, though, which was why they were keeping casualties at a minimum by going on the defensive. If they ignored them and kept marching, their casualties would multiply, so they were forced into a defensive battle.

The plan to stall them was a great success. The enemy obviously understood that they’d get nowhere like this. So what was the next step for them?

“I guess it’s about time,” Lily muttered.

Shiran’s brow twitched just then. She’d read the enemy’s movements through her spirit.

“They’re coming. About two hundred soldiers,” Shiran said.

After taking five hits, the enemy had naturally figured out where they were coming from. Lily wasn’t shocked by their predictable behavior, but by the number of them.

“Hmm, that’s more than we thought.”

“They’re trying to make this decisive. They know that we are few in number, so they plan to slam a suicide squad against us to hold us up while the army marches onward. Two hundred is how highly they evaluate us.”

“Need help?” Lily asked, cocking her head.

“No, I’ll be more than enough,” Shiran answered without hesitation. “Lily, just

wait here for a little while. Get some rest while you can.”

“Mm, I will.”

Lily wasn't in a state to participate in prolonged combat, so she honestly backed down. Shiran left her behind and ran into the forest. Her footsteps were light and powerful, and her undead body that had been running on empty all this time was now brimming with mana. She unconsciously traced her finger along her lips, under the delusion that she could still feel residual heat on them.



The sensation of being filled by what the boy she adored had given her was so reassuring, and also so very sweet. But above all else, it pained her heart. Having to depend on him for mana, Shiran knew full well just how exhausted he'd been because of the Holy Water. She knew how impossible it was for him to give her this much mana right after waking up, which was why she'd immediately realized that something had happened.

Well, even without that bond, she would've noticed. She'd been the one to warn him about it in the first place. She understood the value of the power he'd gained in exchange for his loss, and she swore that she wouldn't waste it.

He had given her more than strength too. His feelings kept the fire burning in Shiran's heart. She was in no way alone in this respect either. The flames his feelings kindled kept spreading. Even if each of them was small on their own, put together, they changed things greatly.



Around that time, the provincial army's pursuit force was prowling after Majima Takahiro's group just as they had been.

This force was technically different from the Maclaurin Provincial Army. Strictly speaking, they weren't even soldiers; they were knights marching under the banner of the margraviate. That said, they were loyal to Margrave Maclaurin, so if their lord commanded it, they were fine with obeying someone outside their normal chain of command. They'd offered their swords to Glantri Maclaurin's righteous cause, after all.

On that point, they were as knightly as knights got, even if their swords were being directed at the innocent elves of reclamation villages. Their skills were also first class.

The division of labor between armies and knightly orders was clearly defined. Armies protected villages and towns, while knights ventured into the forests to subjugate monsters. This pursuit force specialized in moving through forests, a fact that they had repeatedly displayed during this expedition, launching effective ambushes on Majima Takahiro, his monsters, and the elves.

What's more, the remnants of the Holy Order's Fourth Company were lending

a hand, so their battle formation was perfect. Their repeated ambushes had been yielding results too. The enemy was putting up an extremely stubborn resistance, but they were close to their limit now. With just a little more, they would fall.

The knights were sure of this as they circled around to their next ambush point, but that was when they encountered an irregularity.

“Nobody’s coming...”

The pursuit force had split into two groups, and even though it was time to attack at the designated point, no elves were in sight. Still, this wasn’t entirely unexpected.

“I guess they’re getting some rest or something.”

They’d long confirmed that the elves were out of stamina, and it would actually be convenient for them if the elves were stationary. The pursuit force’s objective was only to stall the enemy. All they had to do was pin them down until either the main or the detached force caught up. If the enemy wasn’t moving, they could almost just leave them be.

Of course, at this point in time, the pursuit force had no idea that Rose had halted the main force and Lily was pinning down the detached force. They were under the impression that it wouldn’t take long for the army to catch up, so it wouldn’t be strange if they decided to hold back a little. Louis had conjectured that Majima Takahiro had abandoned the elves without leaving them any guards, but even if that were the case, the elves didn’t need any if the pursuit force just waited. They would survive if nobody attacked them.

However, the pursuit force wasn’t negligent when it came to confirming what their enemies were up to. They were faithful to their duty, so they would never slack off. The elves had no luck.

Not that Majima Takahiro ever relied on such a thing to begin with. He hadn’t underestimated his enemy or relied on luck at all. He had a proper plan in place. He wouldn’t abandon the elves without leaving them any kind of escort. What he’d done was quite literally the opposite.

“Ooh, looks like you’re here. Welcome.”

He'd left the Great White Spider of the Depths behind.

"I'm all done preparing to receive you. You shan't pass this point. Come at me as you will."

Gerbera's expression was fearless as she addressed her hidden enemies. She understood that no matter how strong she was, she couldn't protect the elves against two groups that specialized in long-range attacks. In fact, until now, even when she'd had the help of her companions, she hadn't been able to keep the elves from getting injured.

Was this hopeless, then? Did leaving Gerbera behind achieve anything beyond mere consolation? Of course it did. Gerbera was confident, and the situation had been stacked to support her.

"What the hell is this?" one of the knights muttered.

They were baffled by the abnormality before them.

"A spiderweb...?"

White threads intertwined among the trees of the forest. They were about as thick as a finger, and they dominated a huge area with their peculiar pattern. The web was essentially a spider's barrier; it was large enough to engulf two or three standard houses.

Standing on the web was an enormous white spider, her eight legs spread wide. The scale of everything was off, so everything felt surreal. The girl's smile was so beautiful it was as if she were straight out of a fantasy, which couldn't suit the sight more.

"What's the matter? Are you not attacking?"

Right at the center of the web, a group of elves were huddled together. They looked like pitiful villagers who'd been taken captive by a monster, but that wasn't the case.

"Taking us for fools...!"

After a moment of disarray due to the bizarre scenery, the knights remembered their duty. They nocked their arrows and deployed their glyphs. They'd come to a stop, cautious of the spiderweb, so they were farther away

than usual, but their target was still well within their range.

“Fire!”

The two squads aimed for the elves and unleashed their arrows and magic. Gerbera couldn't intercept all this on her own, but she had no need to. The majority of the arrows and magic got caught up in threads.

Even a coarse web could catch objects with enough threads layered atop one another. The spiderweb was sparse at its edges but densely layered toward the center, so it was very difficult for anything to reach the elves stuck inside it. At the very least, all the pursuit force's magic would be obstructed.

That was easy to see, so the knights' magic, which far surpassed their arrows in destructive potential, was intended to tear through the web by force. The Great White Spider's threads were far stronger than they'd expected, though. It wasn't repelling all damage or anything, but it would take them forever to break through the multiple layers.

So what about arrows? They could unleash more of these than magic, and though many got caught in the web, some had made it all the way to the elves. No screams could be heard, though. Instead, someone was yelling orders.

“Here they come! Shields up!”

It was the reclamation village's elder, Melvin. He was injured, but he still took command, and the elves who could still move did as he ordered and readied their shields. They weren't anywhere near the level of knights, but since they lived in the dangerous Woodlands, they knew their way around a fight. The arrows had lost velocity due to the distance, and so few of them had made it through that the elves were able to manage with their shields.

The pursuit force's misunderstanding was that they believed that the elves had come to a stop because of exhaustion. In truth, the elves hadn't been forced to stop: they'd *chosen* to. They'd resolved themselves to use what strength they had left to resist rather than tire themselves out by running away.

The pursuit force hadn't expected this development. Driven from their homelands, their enemies aided by the symbol of justice in this world, the Holy Order, it was already a wonder that the elves hadn't given up and had

continued running away. It was unimaginable for them to maintain such high morale that they could still resist. It didn't need to be said that this was the work of a single boy.

"The next wave's coming! Brace yourselves!"

Melvin encouraged his brethren as he recalled his conversation with Majima Takahiro. If they were all going to go down together, it'd be better to leave the elves behind and go get Rose. Nonetheless, Majima Takahiro had told him that he didn't intend on losing anyone else and that he didn't have enough strength on his own. He'd wanted Melvin's help.

His words had power. The elves had no idea what the boy had lost, but they could sense his steely determination. That had lit a fire in their hearts. They'd decided to stand and fight so that they could live to see another day. High morale had a direct correlation to a tenacious defense, and the elves didn't falter even as they listened to the terrifying sound of arrows impacting the ground right next to them.

The pursuit force concluded that they wouldn't be able to do anything at this range. They withdrew for the moment and linked back up before immediately splitting again and going on the move.

Fortunately, the web covered a wide range, but it wasn't particularly dense. There was plenty of room to move between the threads. It was more of a maze than a wall. It was possible for them to get closer to the elves. And the closer they were, the thinner the veil between them and their targets.

They needed to be careful of the Great White Spider, but the pursuit force had split into two groups. With only one spider, it couldn't deal with both of them at once, so they marched into the spider's domain. Several had tried to slash the threads with their swords to see if that would work, but they weren't easy to cut through. On the contrary, the sticky threads stuck to their blades, stealing the weapons from them in the process. That meant accidentally touching any of the threads would get them stuck too.

The knights were well aware that their mobility had been limited by a fair amount, but that went both ways. It wasn't a problem so long as they were careful. They kept Gerbera in their sights as they approached covertly.

One group approached Gerbera from the front, while the other approached from the flank. They closed the distance to where they were sure their prey couldn't get away once the fighting began, but no closer. Even from there, they judged that their attacks would be effective enough. The pursuit force was very careful.

Gerbera didn't move. Had she not noticed their approach? Or maybe she had and chose not to move? Either way, they were close enough. The group to her flank silently began preparing their attack, and right as they were about to get started—

“Kuuu!”

An inflated blowfox—Ayame—leaped out in front of them.

“Wha—?!”

She'd detected them with her sharp sense of smell. No other servant could match her in this field. The pursuit force had advanced stealthily, but that was meaningless before Ayame. Not that she really understood what they'd been doing. She'd watched them with curiosity, thinking to herself, “They're moving super slow. Are they sick?”

In any case, her beloved master had asked her to intercept them, so she showed no mercy.

“Graoooh!”

She spat out countless fireballs in the blink of an eye. The knights took up defensive positions in an instant, but the explosions knocked them off their feet one after the other.

“There was more than just the spider?!”

They quickly shifted their focus to Ayame. A blowfox wasn't all that strong a monster. In a head-on battle, it was easy to defeat with this many knights, so their decision was correct in this regard—if not for the current locale, that is. They quickly came to this realization as well.

Both Ayame and the pursuit force specialized in the same thing—long-range engagements. The trees obstructed their aim, and the spiderweb stopped

projectiles. The pursuit force and Ayame were in the same boat in this respect. To get a good shot in, they had to go out of their way to get a good angle around the trees, but the spiderweb prevented the pursuit force from moving about freely to do so.

“Kuuuu!”

In contrast, Ayame ran freely through the forest, completely unhindered. No threads were down at Ayame’s full height, so she could run wherever she wanted to launch her attacks and could easily escape any enemy attacks.

The knights were at a disadvantage. Upon realizing this, they had no other choice but to grit their teeth and retreat. It was worth praising how quickly they came to that conclusion, but the ambush had still failed. This was their first retreat with nothing to show for it since the beginning of this entire expedition.

These were the lucky ones, at least. The ones who’d approached Gerbera from the front had far greater concerns.

“Guh...”

The hiding knights gulped. Gerbera had suddenly turned toward them, and her terrifyingly beautiful face was looking right at them. Unlike the flanking group, this group had remained hidden and had yet to attack, but somehow, Gerbera’s red eyes remained fixed on them. Not that they had any time to ask why that was.

“Retreat!”

It was an unknown circumstance, and they made their decision quickly. They immediately started to go back down the path they came, but Gerbera was even faster to jump into action.

“No way!”

The knights stiffened. They were supposed to be a safe distance away, but Gerbera closed in on them with nightmarish speed. It was as if she were in an open field. The spider threads that should’ve been in her way served as footholds instead, a feat nobody could replicate.

“You’re kidding!”

The spiderweb covering this region wasn't just a simple obstruction. It hindered all trespassers, yes, but it amplified the mobility of the domain's ruler. What's more, Gerbera could tell where any intruders were just by touching it with her feet. This place was in fact a spider's barrier. It was Gerbera's world.

The pursuit force had been most on guard against the Great White Spider, but they didn't know that she could fight like this. Consequently, they had no countermeasures. If she was capable of this terrifying fighting style, why hadn't anyone told them? What had the intelligence officers been doing? It was understandable for them to complain about it, but in this case, it was unfair to blame those responsible for enemy intelligence.

In a flash, Gerbera was giggling a stone's throw away from them.

"I understand why you're shocked. I had forgotten about doing things this way until she mentioned it."

Gerbera was the Great White Spider of the Depths. She was a monster who trampled her enemies with her overwhelming combat ability. She'd even gone head-to-head against cheaters using her mobility and superhuman strength. She'd planned to do the same thing here too, but someone had pointed out something unexpected to her. It was none other than Berta. Due to some sort of change of heart, she'd actively provided advice of her own accord.

"Spider, why the hell don't you ever set up a web?"

It was a simple question. An arachne wasn't supposed to be all that strong in a straight fight. Actually, it was the type of monster to avoid such confrontations whenever possible. They specialized in attacking from their opponents' blind spots. By setting up a web, they created their own domain, and only then could they show their true worth.

"The way you fight is like a swordsman trying to imitate a pugilist. You can pull it off because you're strong, but it still means you're throwing away your weapon."

That was how Berta had evaluated Gerbera's fighting style. In truth, Berta had wondered why Gerbera never set up a web from the very moment she met her.

"You can still fight well enough... More than well enough, in fact... Aah,

dammit... When I think of it like that, it pisses me off. Why do I have to be giving you advice?!"

"O-Ooh? I don't really get it, but sorry?"

To Berta, who'd devoted herself to getting stronger for her king's sake, Gerbera's existence was the definition of unfair. An arachne was supposed to use the majority of its resources as a monster on its threads, yet Gerbera had gotten so strong that it'd become faster for her to go on the attack rather than lie in wait. This had eventually become her fighting style. It was ridiculous, but in a way, it also made perfect sense.

"That Berta. She was seriously angry. It was a little frightening."

Gerbera was acting somewhat carefree, but the knights couldn't afford to forget that she was the Great White Spider of the Depths. In other words, she was a being of utterly nonsensical strength that was even spoken of in legends.

"But now it's over."

Gerbera cracked her blood-soaked fingers. The red coating her was all the more vivid because of how white her skin was.

"No way... Annihilated?"

Having gone back to her roots, the Great White Spider was overwhelming. Inside her world, one half of the pursuit force had drowned in a sea of blood, leaving not even a single survivor. Nothing more could be done, so the other half of the pursuit force had no choice but to run away.

"W-We did it! We did it!"

The elves cheered. They looked at one another in disbelief and shared joyful hugs. Watching this, Gerbera nodded to herself as Ayame came running over.

"Oh, Ayame. You did well too."

Ayame jumped up onto Gerbera's head, then puffed up in satisfaction.

"Kuuu."

"Mm. With this, things are fine for now."

After suffering such losses, the pursuit force wouldn't launch another attack

for a while. They were loyal to their mission. With so many casualties, they would choose another means to carry out their duty. For example, they could accomplish their goal by watching the elves from afar.

With only two real combatants, Gerbera and Ayame had managed to protect all the elves. This was all thanks to the spider's barrier. If they left the area, they'd lose their advantage, which meant they were stuck here.

This was exactly what they wanted, though. They'd secured their safety without taking any damage. Once their companions returned after finishing what had to be done, they could escape.

After watching the cheerful elves for a while, Gerbera looked up at the sky. "We managed here somehow. All that's left is—"



Contrary to Louis's theory, every last elf had been protected. Not only that, but they'd managed to retaliate as well, even though the elves had been on the receiving end for days. That one boy's revival had brought results that far surpassed Louis's expectations.

Returning Lily to the battlefield. Restoring Shiran to fighting condition. Providing advice to Gerbera. Rousing the elves. Each event had been indispensable in turning this situation around. However, the greatest change his return brought had yet to come to light.

"Let's go."

"Right."

Clad in mist, the boy charged in to take back what was dear to him.

Chapter 18: The Battle to Get Her Back

"It's been a while since you rode on my back like this," Berta remarked as she ran through the forest, just a little before we would reach the main body of the Maclaurin Provincial Army. I didn't have any of my other companions with me. It was just me and Berta.

"True. The last time was when we rescued Lily from Takaya Jun, huh?" I answered, recalling my last ride. "Sorry for relying on you over and over."

"It's fine. If you die, my king will grieve," she replied, cold as ever, but then her demeanor changed a little. "No, maybe not."

"Berta?"

"There's no point fooling myself anymore. This is my will. It has nothing to do with my king. I wish to help all of you." She still sounded somewhat cynical, but also a little relieved. "What's with that face, Majima Takahiro?"

"Well, you know. I didn't think you'd say something like that."

"Neither did I," Berta said with a chuckle. Her smile seemed a little girlish somehow. "I'm the one and only failure among my king's subordinates. He desires nothing more than mindless pawns, yet I've changed so much by being with you lot. I wonder if that's why I think of such things."

She spoke earnestly, and her behavior felt like it matched the exact change she was talking about.

"That puppet sort of resembles me," she continued. "She is a shield meant to protect her master, and I am a pawn meant to die for mine. The way we see ourselves is similar, and so is our standing as servants."

"Your standing?"

"I'm the second servant to be given a name."

"Aah, that's what you mean..."

Kudou had many servants, but he didn't even have ten to whom he'd given

names. The majority of them had been selected through the kodoku poison jar method. As far as I knew, he had servants named Dora and Caesar too. However, back when I first met him, Kudou had already had Berta and Anton at his command.

I'd never thought of what order they'd met him in. Maybe this meant Berta had been the second. In that sense, she was the same as Rose. Perhaps that was why Berta felt a certain connection to her.

"In short, I feel arbitrary sympathy," Berta said. "Or maybe, if I weren't me, if I hadn't been given the name Berta..." She spoke as if she were looking at a dream, but that, of course, wasn't what Berta wished for. "I obviously have no intention of denying my service to my king. That's not what I mean. That's impossible, and that's how it should be. I don't wish for happiness."

The way she said that hurt my heart.

"But how do I put it?" Berta added, turning around to look at me. "Because happiness doesn't exist for me, maybe I couldn't stand to see such a thing be lost."

That was the reason she acted like this. Her long black hair fluttered in the wind as her eyes reflected my figure.

"That's why I decided to reveal this form."

Her two wolf heads remained staring forward, her powerful legs dashing through the gaps between the trees, but her human eyes were turned my way, her gaze fixed on me from close proximity.

I recalled the time I rode on Berta's back with Iino during the battle against Takaya Jun. The girl before me now had a slender body much like the one back then, but this girl wasn't riding the wolf. Her upper body sprouted from its back.



She was apparently a scylla. This was Berta's true form, one she'd hidden until now. It'd surprised everyone, but the one most shocked by this had been Lily. No, to be specific, it'd been the one inside Lily—Mizushima. This wasn't just because of Berta's transformation either.

"Todoroki?"

She'd uttered that after coming to the surface for an instant. Todoroki Miya was Iino's best friend and the visitor known as the Beast of Darkness. Berta's true form resembled her so much that Mizushima had unintentionally called her name.

Now that I thought of it, Takaya Jun had used Todoroki Miya's name in an attempt to throw Kudou off. I didn't know the reason for it back then, but if Kudou's servant resembled her that much, it was only natural to suspect that it was relevant in some way. But what did it mean?

It would have been normal to ask such questions, but none of us had. Berta had revealed her true form under the condition that we ask nothing. She'd revealed her secret for our sake, so we couldn't betray her trust.

Although, just the fact that she'd been keeping a secret indicated that something had happened. In all likelihood, it had something to do with Berta's beginnings. In other words, her revealing this form meant she'd seen something in Rose that had made her decide to use her full strength.

"That puppet said she didn't want to die," Berta stated, her lips drawn into a thin line. "Because she's in love. Because she doesn't want it to end here. She admitted she is no more than her master's shield, but she said so anyway."

"I see..."

"But she also said this. That that only makes her want to protect her beloved all the more. That's when she marched off into battle."

Since her feelings had been conveyed to me in the world of light, I could easily picture her doing this. Her devotion was so noble, but that same nobility irritated me a little.

"Rose, you idiot..." I muttered, sounding slightly bitter.

“Are you angry with her?”

“Just a little. It’s ’cause she doesn’t get it.”

“Doesn’t get what?”

“She doesn’t understand a man’s heart. Not in the least. I mean, come on. If she feels that way about me, then I obviously feel the same way about her.”

Berta’s eyes widened just a little, and her lips curved into a slight smile. She seemed somewhat happy.

“I see,” she said. “The puppet discovered love, but she still has much to learn about it.”

“Basically, yeah. Above all else, leaving without confessing directly and waiting for a reply is just awful.”

How could I forgive that? I had plenty I wanted to say and convey to her. Therefore, I was definitely going to get her back.

“Found them,” I said quietly.

Using the thin veil of mist I’d deployed, I’d located the Maclaurin Provincial Army. First, though, I had to get the full picture.

“That’s a whole lot of them...” I remarked.

The swarm of soldiers looked like a dark haze. From what Salvia’s mist was telling me, they easily numbered over three thousand men. The violence of such numbers could trample anything before it. Just by what I could sense through magic, the threat they posed was overwhelming.

“What’ll you do?” Berta asked.

My answer was obvious.

“Let’s go.”

I’d lost so much of myself, but no matter what I would gain in exchange, some things I didn’t want to lose. Thus, it didn’t matter who my opponent was.

Following my directions, Berta kicked it up a notch. Now that she was in her true form, her speed was tremendous. She was even fast enough to compare to Gerbera. She charged straight forward without hesitation, right toward the

enemy army that looked much like a wall at this point.

The enemy obviously noticed us. They should've been preoccupied with Rose's attack, but they were still cautious of potential reinforcements. Plus, we were still pretty far away. At this distance, they were free to unleash all the arrows and magic they wanted.

The officer in charge decided to target us and was just about to give his orders, but I'd already expected this.

"Misty Lodge."

Before they could do anything, I blocked their sight with mist. The fog was dense, obscuring both parties from each other entirely. I could tell disarray was spreading among the soldiers. However...

"They rallied awfully quick..." I commented.

The commander had immediately passed out his orders and calmed his soldiers down. They continued readying their attack. Berta was hurrying, but she wouldn't make it like this. They'd predicted my actions just as I had theirs.

The enemy's firepower was incredible. Even if they attacked randomly, it would be enough of a threat. If they rained arrows and magic over this entire area, Berta would continuously take hits while her own visibility was blocked by the fog. In that case, it would've been better not to use the mist.

Obviously, I'd thought of that beforehand. Nevertheless, I'd dared to play this hand. I'd judged this would be the best way to handle the situation.

"You're all certainly strong," I said, accumulating my mana as the enemy before me quickly prepared to attack. "Maintaining such high standards and gathering such numbers, along with being equipped to the teeth—you're pretty much the embodiment of violence by numbers."

The amount of mana I was using was the most I'd ever handled. This was the power I'd gained in exchange for my loss.

"Even a savior's stamina is finite. With enough time and numbers and the will to make sacrifices, you can eventually wear one out. Yeah, that would definitely work."

This was likely the limit of what I could do while maintaining my humanity. I poured all the mana I gathered into the mist.

“But there’s an exception to everything.”

It became whiter, and whiter, until it dyed the entire world.

“Swallow them whole, Misty Lodge.”

The Maclaurin Provincial Army didn’t know that, as the one who’d made a contract with Salvia, I was capable of this. It wasn’t just a smoke screen; it was also a form of perception magic. However, that was simply a single facet of it.

“Eep...”

As the white mist enshrouded them, one of the soldiers quietly uttered something, unable to suppress his shock. His nocked arrow parted from his bow and plopped to the ground.

“H-Hey...”

The soldier next to him saw this and called out to him, but the frightened soldier no longer had the capacity to respond. He hadn’t even realized that someone was talking to him. His eyes opened wider and wider, and his face contorted.

“Aaaaaaaaaah?!”

He screamed desperately. His colleague had no time to try and stop him as he, who was supposed to be a brave soldier, ran away.

“Aaaah! What the hell is this?! Get away from meee!”

His heart and his mind were completely broken. It was as if he’d seen something terrifying. To him, that was probably true. That was what I’d done, after all.

Salvia’s Misty Lodge had a function that I hadn’t used until now—the power of illusions that could trick the mind. Here, I used that same power on the Maclaurin Provincial Army.

All the soldiers whose hearts had been overwhelmed by the mist were witnessing a huge swarm of monsters tearing them apart. They saw their

comrades being slaughtered, their formations breaking, and their comrades running away. Not many people could do something as meaningless as stand their ground and fight in such a situation.

That said, I hadn't cast the illusion on everyone successfully. If Salvia had been using all her mana at full strength, it might've been possible, but she depended on me as her mana source. I didn't have all that much power. The reason I hadn't even used the Misty Lodge as illusion magic before now was because the number of people it would work on was very limited.

Even on the regular soldiers who didn't have much resistance to magic, it would only work about twenty percent of the time. Well, as I was now, it was around thirty percent. Those still weren't good odds, though. That was my limit. Even so, in this one case, thirty percent was a terrifying number.

"Sorry, Louis. I'll be taking around a thousand of your men."

The main force of the Maclaurin Provincial Army numbered three thousand strong, and I'd affected thirty percent of them. Specifically, approximately one thousand soldiers were under my illusion. That many human minds had been swallowed by my magic in a single bite. As a result, a maelstrom of screams rang in the air loud enough to shake the earth.

"Waaaaaah?!"

"Eeeeeek! Stay back! Stay back! Stay baaaaack!"

"Save me! Someone?! Anyone?! Aaaaaah?!"

Soldiers screamed and ran about. Watching his subordinates in a stupor, one of the officers muttered, "What the hell is going on...?"

His confusion was understandable. As a matter of fact, the Misty Lodge had one facet that put it on a different level—its effective range. Setting aside any destructive potential, even grade 5 magic would be hard pressed to hit every soldier in this large an army.

Nonetheless, the Misty Lodge achieved this with all practicality. Perhaps that efficiency was typical of Salvia's magic, seeing as how she'd wandered the world for near eternity. By applying a limited illusion over that same range, the Misty Lodge became a weapon that could break an entire army.

The battle lines fell apart as if a giant comb had passed through them. This wasn't just their front line either, but the army as a whole. It was such a bizarre scene. The unknown was terrifying. Even the soldiers who were unaffected by the illusion at first began panicking. Then, once their mental state had weakened, the illusion took hold, and the white mist swallowed them too. Forty percent of the entire army was affected now, and then fifty. It was more effective than I'd expected.

"I wonder why...? Ohh, I get it," I murmured to myself, then smiled.

The reason it was working so well was because the provincial army had already been weakened from Rose's hard-fought battle. At this point, they were extremely fragile. Even some of the soldiers who weren't under the illusion's spell started running away. They were no longer in any position to try and intercept us. What was once a perfect wall had cracked open, and Berta charged through.

"Grrrr! Raaaah!"

A broken formation wasn't going to stop Berta as she was now. Flames and ice flew from her two heads, and the line crumbled. Her tentacles fluttered about nimbly, repelling any weapons that approached us. As extra insurance, she had a pair of arms now too.

"I don't like the idea of using the slime's hand-me-downs, though."

Berta held a black spear in her hands. She wasn't accustomed to it, so she used it more like a quarterstaff than a spear, but for the soldiers, this was just one more thing to look out for, which was enough of a threat on its own. They couldn't stop her.

"I'm picking up speed. Hold on tight."

Berta ran, knocking over soldiers as she went. Unlike when we were just going through the forest, the shaking was intense. I desperately clung to Berta's waist so that I didn't get flung off.

And just like that, we went deeper and deeper into the provincial army's ranks. We went straight for the point I'd designated beforehand—straight toward Rose—but that was when Berta yelled a warning.

“Dead ahead! Knights!”

Knights of the Holy Order were in our path. I’d already grasped the situation using the Misty Lodge, so I knew that the illusion hadn’t worked on them very well. Some had been confused, but a knock to their heads had brought them back to their senses. Only they maintained a defensive formation, ready to intercept us.

Not even Berta could keep up this speed and scatter such a powerful group. She slowed down, possibly thinking of taking a detour.

“Don’t!” I yelled.

“But...”

“Please keep going! We’re right there!”

“You don’t need to look so desperate,” Berta said, turning toward me with a troubled frown. “Aah, fine! I just have to do something about it, right?”

After an energetic reply, Berta sped up. We were rapidly closing in on the knights. Then the moment before we collided with them, Berta planted her feet into the ground.

“Go ahead of me!”

And then she snatched me and hurled me right over them.

“What the...?! Shoot him down!” one of the knights shouted.

“Like hell you will!” Berta yelled.

The knights tried to react to the sudden development, but fire and ice poured from her mouths and stopped them. After hurriedly confirming that they’d been detained, I swung my left arm out. My firing line was already set.

“Asarina!”

“Ssster!”

Asarina stretched out right toward where a familiar-looking puppet was holding Rose up.

Aah, I can finally see you again.

Joy welled up inside me, but it was quickly overcome by a different emotion. She really had fought to her limit. Rose had lost all her limbs and was only half her normal size. She was being held up by the collar artlessly as if she was a piece of trash. She was wounded, broken, and damaged. I'd been prepared to see this, but witnessing it with my own eyes sent my thoughts flying.

"Give her back..."

Asarina coiled around the giant puppet who was holding Rose, then immediately pulled me in. She didn't hold back at all, just as I'd instructed, and jarring pain shot through all my joints.

"Aaaaaah!"

Using that momentum, I slammed my sword into the puppet. Its shoulder flew off with a sound like shattering porcelain, dislodging its arm entirely as it fell backward, scattering fragments into the air. The man standing next to it watched in disbelief. Ignoring all that, I stretched out my arm.

"Rose!"

"Mas—?!"

Screaming and falling to the ground was someone irreplaceable to me. I pulled her in and embraced her. I held her in my arms as if I were making sure she existed. I did so gently so as not to harm her broken body, yet firmly as if to never let go.

"Master..."

I wouldn't let her go ever again, but before that...

"Just wait a sec," I whispered to Rose as I held her in my right arm, then turned around. The giant puppet was standing right there.

"Do it!" the man—Ottmar, if I recalled correctly—yelled.

That made this an angel puppet. I remembered seeing them before, but this one was much, much bigger. I doubted its size was just for show too.

I didn't have my sword available: I was too busy holding Rose. A row of knights blocked Berta from reaching me. Regardless, I didn't panic as the puppet charged in with its spear at the ready.

I held out my left hand. Asarina was already coiled around my arm, functioning as an exoskeleton. I'd already made the necessary preparations to wield the Great White Spider's tyranny as well. The amount of mana in my body was far greater than before. As I was now, maybe I could get even closer to her true strength. And that wasn't all.

"Sssster!"

The amplification of my mana meant that Asarina's soil was even richer. In other words, she'd also advanced to a new stage. Wrapped around my arm, she opened her mouth wide at my palm. Her fang-like thorns stretched out longer, thicker, and tougher than ever before. My left arm was now equipped with strange and powerful claws—an imitation of Lily's devilish mantis claws. It was nowhere close to the original, of course, but I also had the Great White Spider's strength backing my arm.

"Wha—?" Ottmar was speechless, but it was too late.

"I don't know anything about righteousness," I said. I was at my limit, at about eighty percent of the strength of the legendary Great White Spider of the Depths. "But I'll be taking her back!"

I swung my arm, and my claws tore the angel puppet apart.

Chapter 19: Never to Let Go Again

The angel puppet went flying away in pieces, its limbs scattering all over the ground. I turned around and flexed the long claws on my fingers a few times.

“Now then, who wants to get dismantled next?”

The knights who’d been looking for an opening to attack me faltered at the sight of the bizarre claws. Seeing the wreckage the puppet had been reduced to in a single strike, it was only normal they would hesitate at this point. That was when Berta caught up to me. She’d forced her way through the wall of knights, but not without getting a few wounds in the process.

“Are you all right, Majima Takahiro?!”

“Yeah, how ’bout you?”

“Fine, of course,” Berta answered, wiping the laceration on her cheek.

It would’ve been hard for me to handle this many enemies on my own, so I was glad she’d made it here.

“Huh...? Berta?” Rose said in bewilderment. It was her first time seeing Berta in this form, so her reaction was to be expected.

“Yeah, that’s right,” Berta replied. “Looks like you’re fine too.”

“Huh? Um, yes.”

Besides being surprised by Berta’s true form, Rose couldn’t have imagined her favorable attitude considering the wolf’s usual obstinacy. The expression Rose made as she kept trying to comprehend the situation was cute. Now wasn’t the time to be explaining things to her, though. Sensing a gaze on me, I turned around. A masculine man stood there, the same one who’d been about to deliver the finishing blow to Rose.

“Commander Louis! Please fall back!”

Soldiers came running over to him. He was apparently the commander of this army, Louis Bard. Margrave Maclaurin had made the decision to get rid of me,

claiming I was the fake savior, but Louis served as his proxy here. In a sense, this man represented the margrave himself. He glared at me with righteous indignation and hatred in his eyes.

“You! You’re Majima Takahiro?!”

He had so much vigor that he was liable to charge me with his sword at any moment. Before he could, though, Ottmar held him back.

“Commander Louis, can I get you to back down?” he asked.

“Sir Ottmar... But if I do...”

“We shall fight this battle.”

Ottmar looked terribly pale. He had nearly twenty angel puppets by his side. He’d made these on the spot, and they were likely far weaker than the large puppet I’d broken, but there were a good number of them. What’s more, the knights of the Holy Order surrounded me and pointed their blades my way.

“You must take command of the soldiers as quickly as possible,” Ottmar said to Louis, keeping his eyes fixed on me. “This is an unparalleled opportunity.”

“An opportunity?” Louis said. “But the army...”

“Yes. The army is in tatters. It’s probably an effect of this mist, but that doesn’t matter right now. The important thing is that Majima Takahiro has charged into our midst on his own. So long as we finish him, our objective will be fulfilled.”

Ottmar spoke indifferently. The soldiers’ chaotic screams still persisted all over, but it was as if he didn’t hear them.

“B-But Sir Ottmar,” Louis said with a daunted look, “to put up a fight, we first need to gather the retreating soldiers.”

“No. Leave them for later. First, we finish Majima Takahiro. A fair number of soldiers have scattered, but a good forty percent should still remain. With over a thousand soldiers, we can definitely bring Majima Takahiro down.”

Ottmar remained calm despite the situation. He didn’t let himself get swept away by the flow. He kept his eyes on what he had to do—and only on what he had to do.

As a matter of fact, Louis's argument wasn't necessarily wrong. The soldiers under my illusion were running away without a care. Being stranded in a forest was bad enough, but this was the Woodlands. The Maclaurin Provincial Army was only strong as a single entity working under a commander—each individual was only as strong as the average soldier. If they weren't recovered immediately, a significant number of them would be devoured by the Woodlands. Ottmar's decision was synonymous with abandoning them. It wasn't that Ottmar was being irresponsible, though.

"Encircle the area and corner Majima Takahiro. We'll stall him here and buy you the time to do so."

The ones in the most danger here were the few knights who had to fight. Ottmar had taken on that role with them as if it were perfectly natural, but he had no fervor like Louis. That said, he didn't use others as convenient tools like Travis had. Well, maybe he did, but he was one of those tools too. Ottmar made decisions based purely on whether they'd accomplish his objectives.

Was the way he treated people as numbers and disregarded the value of any individual because he was a soldier loyal to his mission? Or had he lost his heart, much like the puppets he manipulated? At any rate, his instructions got through to Louis.

"Ugh... Very well."

Louis was a soldier too, and he understood the validity of Ottmar's plan. Their target had dived into enemy territory with almost no protection: they couldn't let this opportunity pass. Louis withdrew so that Ottmar could pass out his orders.

At present, it would be difficult to make use of an army that had pretty much been routed. Nonetheless, Ottmar had determined that Louis would be able to gather his scattered soldiers and focus them on the enemy in front of them. He was probably right too.

"Maintain the envelopment. Support my puppets where appropriate."

Ottmar's plan was to buy time until the army finished preparing. If they pulled it off and Louis ignored all the sacrifices necessary to launch an all-out offensive, the power in my left arm and Berta's assistance wouldn't be enough

for us to get away. We wouldn't go down without a fight, but we would eventually run out of stamina and be crushed by their numbers. It was undeniable.

"You've made an error in judgment, Majima Takahiro," Ottmar stated. "You'll die because you tried to save that puppet."

Rose's broken body stiffened in my arm.

"How unfortunate," he continued. "If only you had abandoned it and run away, you would've ended this while the scar was still shallow."

Ottmar was indifferent to the end, intending to dampen my spirits. Whether that worked on me, though, was another matter.

"You just don't get it," I said, laughing down at him. "While the scar is shallow? Don't be stupid."

I glanced at Rose. She didn't seem to get it either, so now was as good a time as any to make myself clear.

"I'm here because that's a fatal wound for me."

"Master..."

The presence in my arm looking up at me felt so dear. That sensation alone ensured that I would remain unwavering.

"I see... So you've made your decision," Ottmar said, lowering his voice.

Even as he spoke, his angel puppets closed in little by little. Farther to the back, the knights were watching for any openings. They were showing me that if I let my guard down, they would attack, their goal to deplete me both physically and mentally. Their ultimate goal was to buy time, but they weren't going to let me have it easy. The situation was a powder keg ready to blow at any moment.

"Yes, it's just as Majima Takahiro says," Berta said, breaking the silence and looking down at Ottmar. "You lot don't understand a thing."

"What?" Ottmar muttered quietly, sensing something in her gaze.

Berta's calm demeanor showed that, despite the knights surrounding us, she

didn't feel cornered. She then glanced toward me.

"They're here."

"Yeah." I nodded, understanding the meaning behind her brief words. "I was ready to slog it out in a battle of attrition for a bit, but they're earlier than expected. Looks like she really put in some effort for us."

"What are—" Ottmar started, but froze midsentence.

A shadow fell over us. Realizing that something was above him, Ottmar looked up at the foggy sky. Directly overhead, what could easily be mistaken for a massive boulder came plummeting down.

"Wha—?!"

Enormous wings spread out, stirring up the mist. Its wingspan was about ten meters wide, and the majority of its body was covered in a sturdy carapace.

"Graaaaawr!"

Fire began igniting in its mouth, sending embers dancing in the air.

"It can't be... A dragon?!" Ottmar yelled, wide-eyed in shock.

"Graaaaah!"

The dragon landed as if to protect us, bathing the bewildered knights in flames. That wasn't enough to bring down knights of the Holy Order, but caught off guard, they were forced to fall back. As the dragon's roar shook the air like an electric current, a young girl called out to me.

"Takahiro!"

A small figure leaped from the roaring dragon's back. Her red hair seemed even more vivid than the red conflagration behind her.

"Lobivia!"

Just as I called her name, she dove into my chest.

"Takahiro! Rose! You okay?!"

"Yeah, we're fine. You did well."

"Mm. I got through to them."

Lobivia nuzzled her head against my chest. She didn't usually act like this. Part of it was due to her emotional instability, but accomplishing what she'd set out to do played a larger role. The fruits of her actions were right before us.

"She can't talk like that, so I have a message from Ella," Lobivia said, glancing at the dragon who was holding back our enemies with fire. The dragon took a quick look our way, and Lobivia spoke for her. "'Now that we've lost our settlement, we have nobody to turn to. You protected my little sisters. To repay that debt, and for so much more, we dragons shall fight by your side,' she says."

"I see. Thank you, Ella."

The dragon howled in response. After giving her a smile, I wrapped an arm around Lobivia.

"You too, Lobivia. You really did good."

"Mm."

I'd asked Lobivia to contact the dragons who'd escaped to safety. It was of course no coincidence that she'd located them. The Mist Barrier covered this region, and the dragons of Draconia had managed to live here because they were the only ones who could navigate it.

However, as the one who'd made that barrier herself, Salvia was a step above them. In a sense, she was the Mist Barrier itself. It was no exaggeration to say that it was the Misty Lodge but on a grander scale.

I'd asked Salvia to link up with the nearly destroyed barrier to locate the dragons who'd been too injured to stay on the run. Fortunately, the majority of them had been nearby. Thanks to that, we'd saved those who had nowhere to go, provided healing for those who needed it, and asked those who could fight for their help. Right about now, Kei was likely treating the injured. Those who could fight had answered their littlest sister's call and had come flying over.

"D-Dragons?!"

Screams echoed all over. Beyond the fog, giant shadows leisurely flew about. There were seven of them. Just as the Maclaurin Provincial Army started to rally back to a functional state, flames poured down from above. The dragons, who'd remained in hiding despite their vast power, finally bared their fangs, and the

sight shattered the spirits of the already-routed provincial army.

“Majima Takahiro!” Ottmar said with a groan. “Is this your last hand?!”

Unable to retaliate, the soldiers scattered randomly as flames rained down on them. With this attack, even if the knights sacrificed themselves to buy time, it would be impossible for the remnants of the army to launch an all-out offensive. The basis of Ottmar’s plan had flown out the window.

So what would his next move be? We glared at him, waiting for him to speak.

“Retreat.”

At the same time he gave that command, the angel puppets charged as one.

“As expected. He acts fast.”

I’d predicted this and swung my claws without hesitation. My other companions intercepted the puppets too. Our enemy was shrewd, though. After commanding his subordinates to retreat, Ottmar sent out more angel puppets against us. Using up his power to the last drop, he nearly collapsed, and the other knights picked him up and ran off. His reckless actions paid off, because by the time we finished dealing with all the angel puppets, the knights were a fair distance away.

“We chasing them?” Lobivia asked.

If we seriously wanted to, we could probably annihilate them, but I shook my head.

“No. We should take this chance to group back up with everyone.”

This battle was our victory, but other fights were going on. In particular, the detachment that’d been sent around still had plenty of strength. Lily and Shiran were holding them back, but if we acted too slow, the detachment could reach the elves before us. It was best to meet up with Lily and Shiran, then go get Gerbera and Ayame.

“We’re pulling back.”

I held Rose in my arms and mounted Berta, whereas Lobivia jumped up onto Ella’s back. Berta broke into a dash, and Ella roared. She was signaling her siblings to retreat. The fighting here was over.

“Still, it would’ve been nice to finish either Louis or Ottmar here and now,” I muttered to myself.

Even if we pulled through today, Louis wouldn’t give up. He was absolutely going to reorganize the Maclaurin Provincial Army and have another go at us. The same went for Ottmar of the Holy Order.

“No need to fuss about that,” Berta said. “You can just use the time to think about what to do. After so many losses, it’ll take a while for them to regroup. We’ve bought more than enough time.”

“Yeah, you’re right.”

Until now, we’d been forced to deal with events on the spot while they drove us into a corner. Given enough time to deal with them, things would be a different story.

“Besides, so long as you have time, things might change,” Berta added.

“How so?”

I cocked my head. She was implying something, but I couldn’t tell what. Berta’s human half turned to look at me.

“It’s nothing,” she said, shaking her head. “It’s not for certain, so I’ll refrain from saying anything.”

Something had come to Berta’s mind, but she didn’t say more than that. Instead, she took a quick glance at my chest.

“Besides, don’t you have something more important to talk about?”

“I sure do.”

This time, her words were easy to understand. I nodded, then looked down at the girl who was still in my arms.

“M-Master...” Rose said, meeting my gaze with a start.

She reacted like a child who’d been caught playing a prank. She kind of resembled a small animal, which was pretty cute, but I couldn’t afford to be lenient here.

“F-Forgive me. I acted selfishly,” she said.

“Seriously.”

Rose’s expression stiffened. Normally, she’d be prostrating herself on her hands and knees to apologize, but with no limbs, she couldn’t even do that. I felt a little sorry for her, but after causing me so much anxiety, I had to be a little angry. I hadn’t lied to Berta when I told her I was angry with Rose, so I had to get that across to the person in question too.

“If you really died, I would never have forgiven you.”

I hefted up her light body a little, staring down at her face from above. As I did, Rose immediately started acting flustered.

“Wah?! Master?!”

“I can’t tell if you’re angry with her or pampering her,” Berta said with an exasperated sigh.

“Both,” I said, shrugging. “In Rose’s case, this is the most efficient way.”

Maybe that wasn’t actually a bad idea. It was a good opportunity to explain just how dear she was to me.

“U-Um, Master?” Rose said, her voice very faint.

“What is it?” I asked.

“Please stop teasing me. I’m so unsightly right now.”

Even without any of her limbs, Rose made sure to press the left side of her face between my neck and shoulder. She’d been struck by the enemy, and half her face was now broken. She didn’t want me to see her like that, and I wasn’t the type to tease her about it either.

For that reason, I pushed Rose away from me again and held her in front of me, placing a hand on her cheek. This was partly to hide the part she wanted to keep covered, and partly to keep her face fixed in place, as Berta’s running was jostling us about.

“M-Master...?”

I decided to pamper her while also properly communicating my feelings, so I came up with the best way to do it.

“Never leave my side again, Rose.”

I pulled her in and locked her in an embrace so that she would never think of vanishing without a word again. I mentally thanked Berta as she pretended not to know what was going on and brought my face closer to Rose's.

Chapter 20: Proof of Righteousness

Several days after Majima Takahiro's attack, the provincial army led by Louis gathered its main and detached forces, then set up a camp in the wetlands that had once been covered by the Mist Barrier. Not long after, while Louis energetically ran around the camp, actively reorganizing the army after the many losses they'd suffered, he received a certain report.

"Ridiculous..." Louis groaned. "Aker's royal family has accepted Majima Takahiro?"

"Yes. We have been sent a formal declaration. They protest the attack on their innocent citizens and state that they accept the man who protected them, Majima Takahiro."

All of Louis's captains froze at the report. In other words, the entire nation of Aker was now their enemy.

"The second prince, Philip Kendall, sent the message. He demands we leave their borders."

"That man did...?" Louis questioned.

During the chaos the illusions in the mist had caused, Philip had escaped the provincial army. It'd been very likely that he would have died in the Woodlands, but he'd made a desperate struggle to reunite with his local forces. He'd then filed a complaint regarding the Maclaurin Provincial Army's actions.

The army had restrained a member of the royal family, attacked an innocent reclamation village, and hunted down the elves who'd escaped the village, so Aker had made an official proclamation unveiling all these details.

Aker had historically been hostile toward the Margraviate of Maclaurin, so hatred and discontent concerning the provincial army's border transgression had spread like wildfire among the populace. News of the fake savior and monster tamer, Majima Takahiro, had also been widely spread, and their anger toward the provincial army led to a show of sympathy and support for him.

Normally, it would've taken them a good amount of time to accept someone who led monsters, even for Aker, but because he had protected the elves from the margraviate, the populace supported him. This was quite the ironic outcome for the provincial army.

Through Philip's negotiations, Majima Takahiro's group and the elves of the reclamation village were taken in without any issues, and Aker's royal family and army had immediately demanded that the Maclaurin Provincial Army withdraw from their borders.

Louis ground his teeth. He'd had apprehensions about this exact outcome from the very beginning. Not that Louis understood, but Aker treated elves as regular citizens. He knew that if news of the provincial army's actions became public knowledge, he'd rouse their anger, which was why he'd intended to bring this to an end as quickly as possible.

However, now Aker's royal family and its army had an accurate grasp of things. Even if Louis withdrew from their borders for now, if the situation at large was left as is, Aker might gather its forces and even take more drastic measures. Since the nation was always under threat, it was difficult for it to mobilize, so it didn't pose a serious risk. But taking Majima Takahiro's monsters into account, it was a different matter entirely.

As for the Maclaurin Provincial Army, they'd recovered over half of the soldiers who'd wandered into the Woodlands because of that magic mist. They were now over four thousand strong. Nevertheless, things weren't good.

The soldiers that'd been part of the main force were extremely exhausted and would need sufficient rest before they could fight again. About the only ones who could be put to use were the soldiers who'd been a part of the detachment. Also, after leaving the Woodlands, Louis hadn't been able to contact Ottmar, and the knights of the Holy Order who'd accompanied the pursuit force had also pulled back.

In short, his forces were at half strength, and things had changed drastically, a thought that weighed heavily on Louis. Even so...

"What shall we do, Commander Louis?"

After brooding over it for a bit, Louis responded, "We cannot possibly forgive

an enemy of the world.”

“Meaning...we’re going to stir up trouble with Aker?” his subordinate asked, his voice flat because of the tension.

“Lord Maclaurin had the same intentions to begin with. I did too, of course,” Louis said, unwavering in his determination. His words were full of conviction. “Even if circumstances have worsened, those who draw back cannot be called righteous. No matter what happens, justice must be carried out.”

“Commander Louis...”

His subordinates’ expressions brightened, seeing their commander so stout and resolute. It stood to reason; all of them conformed to Louis’s ideals.

“Understood! Let’s do it!”

“Let’s show them our spirit!”

“Justice will prevail!”

The Maclaurin Provincial Army was powerful. Their strength lay not in their abundant wealth or their proficiency, but in their heart. At the very least, in concurrence with the margraviate’s values, they were virtuous, devoted, and even noble. Moreover, they would never stop.

“Well said, everyone,” Louis remarked. “Given enough time, Aker’s army will prepare for battle. Before they do, let’s launch an attack on the town Majima Takahiro is staying in!”

Louis’s words rang loud and clear. This was a declaration of war against Aker and would mean killing people he recognized as human—people who weren’t elves. Everyone here understood that. Fighting humans to save humanity was a contradiction, but they were aware of this and would avoid it if possible.

Nevertheless, they were ready to make such sacrifices. Much like how they were ready to throw themselves into the fire for the sake of justice, they were prepared to sacrifice others if necessary. With such resolve, they wouldn’t stop of their own will. In fact, what stopped them was something else entirely.

“I see... You have quite the strong will.”

Louis felt a chill run down his spine. The subordinate who’d questioned him

earlier had just spoken so coldly all of a sudden. No. That voice didn't belong to the subordinate he knew. It was younger, as if it had come from a boy speaking to a lowly insect. In truth, the subordinate had suddenly changed into a tall boy, and even his clothes were those of a visitor now.

"Identify yourself!" Louis yelled, drawing his sword and stepping a few paces back with his subordinates.

The boy turned toward him. His masculine features clashed with his inorganic expression. He didn't seem human at all. That was because he wasn't.

"I'm Anton. To be specific, Anton's spawn."

"And I am its king," another boy said. Despair incarnate stepped in among them. "A pleasure to meet you. My name is Kudou Riku."

The boy was wearing the armor of the provincial army. Taking off his helmet, he revealed the slender features of someone who had nothing to do with fighting. However, the danger he posed wasn't one measured by his looks.



“Kudou Riku... The Lord of Darkness!” Louis yelled in shock, his eyes wide.

“I don’t remember ever calling myself that,” Kudou Riku said, his shoulders shaking in amusement, “but it seems that’s been going around. Well, whatever. As the self-proclaimed Demon King, it’s not a bad nickname. Yes. I am the Lord of Darkness.”

On the surface, he looked like he was having fun, but his eyes remained ice-cold. Even if one ignored his chilling glare, it was obvious what he’d come here for.

“Ugh... So you’ve come to rescue Majima Takahiro as a fellow evil monster tamer?”

“Well, that’s the gist of it. I can’t have you killing him, after all.”

The Maclaurin Provincial Army, who’d been so fired up only a few seconds ago to launch another attack on Majima Takahiro, were now extraordinarily tense. Nobody had expected the Lord of Darkness to arrive. The only one who could’ve predicted this development was Berta.

The change she’d mentioned a few days ago referred to this. The Maclaurin Provincial Army had taken too much time. Or perhaps it was better to say that Majima Takahiro and his servants had held out too well.

Berta understood her king. If he learned of the danger that had befallen Majima Takahiro, he would do something to help in one way or another. She hadn’t imagined that he would boldly charge right into the middle of the enemy camp, though.

“It’s unfortunate that I didn’t get to save him when he was in the most danger, but that’s my senpai for you. I’m glad he made it through safely. I’ll take over things from here,” Kudou boldly declared, then his expression went blank. “Honestly speaking, I’m a little pissed. Have a full taste of my revenge for trying to kill my senpai.”

“Guh! You filthy demon!” Louis wasn’t going to just take it without putting up a fight, of course. Humiliated, he clenched his teeth and glared at his sworn enemy. “Don’t belittle us!”

Much like Majima Takahiro, Kudou Riku was an unforgivable enemy of the world. He had to be defeated, even if they all had to die to do so.

Louis steeled himself. “Inform all our forces! We’ll defeat the Lord of Darkness here and now!”

Once he gave his orders, everyone acted quickly. The captains dispersed to gather their subordinates, and the soldiers grabbed their weapons as they received said orders in turn, like a wave spreading from the command tent. They then began amassing around Louis. The knights who’d taken part in the pursuit force ran over too. This was the quick and decisive action the powerful Maclaurin Provincial Army was known for.

That said, they were far too late to do anything.

“What?”

Screams could be heard from all over the camp.

“What’s going on...?”

Louis started to harbor a suspicion. He looked around in confusion and saw several soldiers screaming. He then turned his gaze to what they were looking at, and his eyes shot open.

“Wh-What is that?!”

Despite being an outstanding commander, Louis was frozen speechless. He was staring at a black tide that was closing in on the camp, which was absurd. This region was far away from the coast, and there were no rivers nearby in danger of overflowing. Still, what could only be seen as a black wave ran over the open field.

“Impossible...”

By the time Louis and the others in the command tent noticed, the tide had already reached the edge of their large encampment. It then began engulfing anything and everything in its path. Louis quickly grabbed the telescope at his hip and peered through it.

“Tripdrills...?!” he said, his voice stifled.

That was the name of a fish-type monster that migrated over land in swarms.

They herded in such large numbers that not even saviors could do anything about them. They were essentially a natural disaster, so settlements were only created when it was known they wouldn't be in the tripdrills' migratory path.

Once in a while, a section of the swarm would split off and attack human settlements. Even these sections were far beyond what people could normally handle and had resulted in devastating casualties. This swarm wasn't all that large, but they still numbered close to a thousand monsters.

"They're under the command of the Lord of Darkness...?" Louis uttered in shock.

"Allow me to introduce you," Kudou Riku said, grinning. "This is one of my trump cards, Gustav. Well, that's the name of the swarm as a whole, anyway."

Louis's realization was a little off the mark. Kudou Riku's power had limits, so he couldn't control the entire swarm, but he didn't need to. Only a few dozen at the head of the pack were under Kudou's control. Tripdrills moved as a group and instinctually followed those who were at the front. Therefore, if he dominated a few dozen from a swarm and peeled them away, he could guide a section of the monsters with them.

He didn't have control over each one, so it was difficult to put them to use, but if he managed to slam them into an enemy, their destructive potential was peerless. They worked great as a last resort. They could even trample several saviors to death at once.

"Ah... Aaah..."

Unable to pass out any useful orders, Louis stood stock-still. How could he think of anything to say? Nothing could be done. Still, he could be commended for remaining on his feet. Many of his subordinates fell to their knees as they witnessed the hopeless sight of the tide trampling everything in its path. This was the end for them.

"We...lost?" Louis uttered, his voice trembling. "Lost? Us? It can't be. Righteousness can't lose. That can't be allowed!"

He clenched his fists and screamed in anger.

"Are we not righteous?!"

Like many who lived for faith, Louis was pure of heart. He genuinely believed in the righteousness of his actions. He screamed from his soul, and Kudou Riku didn't deny him.

"Yes. You are righteous. I guarantee it," he said, an air of kindness in his tone. "After all, I'm the Demon King, certain and absolute evil. If you faced me and died, wouldn't that make you righteous?"

A strange sound came from Louis's throat. Unlike Majima Takahiro and Rose, Kudou acknowledged Louis's righteous cause. He accepted it, yet he still trampled them to death. How evil he was. Such dreadful behavior suited the Demon King.

"Aaah... Aaaaaah!" Louis screamed, no longer able to bear it. "You mustn't be allowed to exist! I'll kill you right here! Everyone, after me!"

This was a showing of Louis's prodigious talent. Gustav was already close enough that he couldn't run away, but in this one instant, they could attack Kudou Riku. He had sneaked deep into the camp, and no other monsters were in sight aside from Anton's spawn. Even if they would all die, if they could at least kill Kudou Riku, Louis's justice would be carried out.

Seeing their commander leap into action, the soldiers also regained their spirits.

"O-Ooooooh!"

They bellowed a war cry and charged into action. The knights overtook Louis and were the first to strike at Kudou Riku.

"The enemy of all mankind! Die!"

The only one here aside from Kudou Riku was Anton's spawn. The knights had rushed Kudou so fast that they hadn't given Anton any time to get in the way. She hadn't needed to in the first place, though. Anton didn't even try to help her king. She simply watched with emotionless eyes.

"What...?!"

The knight who'd struck first raised his voice in shock. Something like green mud had jumped out of Kudou Riku's sleeve and blocked his sword.

“Keep stopping them like that, Caesar.”

Kudou passed out his orders without even taking a single step. Two knights who’d slashed at him began panicking, their faces convulsing.

“I-I can’t pull it out?!”

Their swords had sunk into the green mud and wouldn’t budge an inch.

“Then let’s move on,” Kudou Riku said, glancing at them briefly. “Friedrich, deploy.”

Four stone wings stretched from his back. They originally belonged to a monster called a fire dragonfly that had transparent red wings. However, the wings at Kudou Riku’s back were four different colors—red for fire, green for wind, blue for water, and yellow for earth—and their texture was closer to that of a monster called an elemental. The wings sparkled with mana. This was the elemental dragonfly Friedrich, a means of attacking that Kudou Riku had prepared for himself using the kodoku poison jar method.

“Fire.”

His wings unleashed a flurry of magic. Those who’d tried to attack him were mowed down to the last man. All that remained were the collapsed figures of the brave knights and soldiers.

“Not bad for a trial run.”

Kudou Riku looked over the disaster before him. The reason he’d gone all the way to the center of the enemy camp was to test his new power. The results were satisfactory; it’d gone just as he’d expected.

He then spotted a moving figure.

“Gah... Aah... You bastard...”

It was Louis, soaked in blood. He’d gotten hit by the flurry of magic too. He’d survived due to his subordinates protecting him and a turn of good luck.

“How tenacious,” Kudou Riku said.

“You...bastaaaard!”

With his burnt hand, Louis gripped his sword and threw himself at the Demon

King. He was moving entirely through willpower, but a figure suddenly blocked his path. It was the girl who'd been hiding inside Kudou Riku's shadow, just in case.

"Just die."

Dora's arms transformed into blades and cut Louis down.

"Ah... Gah..."

Blood dyed the entirety of Louis's torso. It was a fatal wound. Nevertheless, he kept himself from falling. Tenacity could only get him so far, though.

"Lord...Mac...laurin... I...carry...justice..." His last words addressed his respected lord.

Louis Bard then sank to the floor, and just like that, the Maclaurin Provincial Army that had been dispatched to Aker was annihilated.



After that, the swarm of tripdrills trampled everything in their path. The only space that avoided any harm was the immediate area around Kudou Riku.

The majority of the monsters weren't under his control, so he was actually among their targets, but he used his ability on the spot to immediately dominate the ones who got nearest to him to turn them aside.

All of the soldiers and knights of the provincial army had either run away or were dead. Seeing that there was no more danger, Dora turned to her king.

"My king, I'm glad you're unharmed. The Maclaurin Provincial Army is now finished."

"Yes, it is," Kudou said with a composed nod. "Although, I doubt this is the end of everything. I wonder what'll happen next? The Holy Order and the margrave...and maybe other forces too. I'm sure things are still in flux."

What was reflected in Kudou's cold eyes?

"Let's move. We need to fulfill our objective."

With that, the Demon King began walking away from the devastation he had created.



“What did you say?”

In the most affluent town in the Margraviate of Maclaurin, the mining city Nourias, Glantri Maclaurin met some unexpected guests inside one of Fort Nourias’s rooms. One of the guests sitting on the sofa was a girl. She had beautiful, long black hair and strong-willed features. Her expression was tense as she watched the situation develop. The other guest was a boy. He had a pretty face and a tall, symmetrical build. His attitude toward the margrave was well practiced.

“Like I said, I’m here to protest.”

Despite being calm, the boy spoke firmly. He was faced with one of the greatest authorities in the world, and although he spoke with civility, he acted boldly, something he could do because of his position.

The exploration team was an organization far beyond normal. It was a gathering of a hundred honored visitors—saviors in this world. This was their leader, the Sword of Light Nakajima Kojirou. Next to him was the Skanda lino Yuna.

“I’ve heard everything from lino here,” Nakajima Kojirou said, gesturing to the girl next to him with his eyes. “She says you dispatched your army to subjugate the ‘fake savior’ Majima Takahiro.”

“I have. Is that what you’ve come to protest? In that case, there’s nothing to say here, even if you are a great savior.”

The margrave was blunt and unmoving, exactly as he had been when lino Yuna had tried protesting. If this were a request from any individual savior, it would surely end with the same result, but this time was different.

“Please don’t misunderstand,” Nakajima Kojirou said. “This is a protest from the entire exploration team.”

For the first time, the margrave visibly reacted. His gentle wrinkles began trembling.

“What...do you mean by that?”

“The exploration team is already well known within the Empire as an organization of saviors. We have connections with many nobles too. Using several of them, we’ve already asked that they spread the news that this entire incident surrounding Majima Takahiro is unjust. I’m sure it’ll reach the Holy Church soon too.”

If a single individual protested, they would have nothing more than their status as a savior to rely on. If the other party respected that and complied, it would be one thing, but if they insisted on keeping to their ways, all negotiations were over. This was different.

The exploration team already had the support of much of the world, and they were the ones making this protest. What’s more, they were dragging public opinion at large into the matter. Nakajima Kojirou had created a situation that couldn’t be ignored.

“Margrave, please prepare a seat to discuss reconciliation with Majima Takahiro.”

The entire world was on the move, with a single boy at its center.



Extra Story: Majima Takahiro's Envoy *Kei's POV*

The day after Takahiro's return, after we finally shook off the Maclaurin Provincial Army, we set up camp inside the Woodlands covering western Aker. I'd fallen asleep because I'd spent multiple consecutive days using too much healing magic, and when I woke up, Lobivia spoke to me right away.

"Huh...? Takahiro did?" I responded.

"Mm."

He apparently wanted to talk with me about something and was waiting. Having overslept, I looked up in a daze, where I saw a red sky overhead.

"How long have I been sleeping...?" I asked.

"About an entire day."

"Is that so...? W-Wait, an entire day?!"

That woke me up in an instant. That was bad. Even if I was exhausted, a whole day was far too long to sleep.

"A-Awawawawa! And I've been keeping Takahiro waiting?!"

He'll think I'm lazy! I couldn't let that happen. It wasn't praiseworthy behavior as it was, but it was even worse if it made Takahiro think of me that way. It was too embarrassing. I got up in a panic, filled a bucket with water using magic, and washed my face in a hurry.

"You could've just woken me up," I said.

"Takahiro said you're probably tired."

"That's true, but... Aah! I've got bed hair!"

"Bed hair?" Lobivia sat cross-legged, looking up at me and yawning. "It don't look any different."

"It does! You're so mean!"

"O-Oh. Sorry 'bout that."

Lobivia looked bewildered. She just didn't get it. I'd thought this for a while now, but Lobivia didn't have enough awareness as a girl. She lacked tact too.

"It's totally different," I said, puffing my cheeks in discontent. "Besides, I'll be in front of Takahiro."

"Does that make a difference?"

"It totally does..."

I couldn't keep him waiting, though. I wet my hair and smoothed it down so I looked a little presentable, then headed out to go see Takahiro.



"An envoy?" I asked.

"Yeah," Takahiro said with a nod, seated on the bedding inside the manamobile. "For the time being, we've gotten away from the Maclaurin Provincial Army. So long as we hide in the Woodlands like this, they won't find us so easily. That's why, using this opportunity, I'd like to get in touch with Aker's royalty. At the very least, I want to ask them to take the reclamation villages' elves under their protection."

"The villagers... But what about you, Takahiro?"

"Well, if possible, I'd like to establish a friendly connection, but that depends on them. Aker must have opinions of their own on the matter, so it's better not to aim too high."

This envoy was, at most, for the sake of all the villagers.

"However," Takahiro continued, "if we take the elves with us in a large group and move around, the provincial army might catch us again. It would be best to do this with just a few people...but if I go, everyone else is saying they'll come along."

"Obviously. Think of the situation," Lily said, holding his arm from the side. "I mean, you need to rest for a while, Master."

She pouted. Since it was only us in the vehicle, her lower half was that of a slime, and a tentacle stretched out toward Takahiro. It looked as if she was restraining him, which was probably just a joke, but it was true that Takahiro

was in the middle of a medical checkup after acting so recklessly.

“I’m feeling healthy enough, though,” Takahiro insisted.

“Master?” Lily said, her voice a little scary.

“Yeah, yeah, I get it.” He smiled helplessly, then turned to me once more.

“Anyway, that’s the gist of it. I can’t go, so I’d like you to go as my envoy...well, messenger, I guess. I plan on asking a few others too.”

“Oh, so it’s not just me,” I said, sighing in relief.

Come to think of it, a little girl like me couldn’t possibly serve as an envoy, and it was way too dangerous to travel through the Woodlands to the nearest town on my own. My role was likely no more than tagging along and handling any odd jobs. That was part of being an envoy too. It actually made sense to me now.

“Can you do this for me?” Takahiro asked.

“Of course.” I obviously wasn’t going to refuse. It was for the villagers’ sake, and it was also Takahiro’s personal request. “I’ll do my best.”

I clenched my fists in excitement.



“I thought I was gonna die...”

It had all happened so suddenly. The day after Takahiro asked me to be his envoy, I’d left early in the morning, and it wasn’t even noon yet. Unable to keep my shaky body up, I fell to my knees and planted my hands on the ground. All the blood had drained from my face. I didn’t even feel alive.

“You’re laying it on thick,” Lobivia said, looking exasperated.

Her big sister Ella was next to her, readjusting her clothing with a smile.

“It seems flying through the skies is harsh on those who are unaccustomed to it,” she said.

“That so?” Lobivia asked curiously.

I agreed with Ella on this one, and I wasn’t the only one who was worn out. Right next to me, Leah and Helena were sitting on the ground, each with a hand

to their heaving chests. Adolf hadn't collapsed, but his masculine face was pale and convulsing.

These six, including me, were the envoys to Aker, although over half of us were now out of commission. If this was all someone were to witness, they'd think we'd gotten involved in some kind of trouble, but that wasn't the case. We had simply ridden on Ella's back as she flew until we were somewhat close to our destination.

"Still, it feels so good to fly," Lobivia said, cocking her head. She was the only one who was perfectly fine after the ride.

Her backpack started shaking noisily. The torn wings hidden inside still hadn't healed, so she was no doubt happy to fly through the skies for the first time in a while by riding on Ella's back. I understood this, but I couldn't sympathize with her.

"Anyway, let's rest for a bit," I said tearfully.

We'd landed away from any prying eyes so that Ella's dragon form wouldn't accidentally cause an uproar. We still had to walk for about three days to reach our destination, but forcing ourselves until we couldn't walk anymore would be putting the cart before the horse. We rested until we regained some strength in our legs, then began our journey. Our destination was Diospyro, the town where we would carry out our discussions.



Adolf, Leah, Helena, Ella, and Lobivia. Including me, that made six people whom Takahiro sent to Diospyro as envoys, and he had a reason for entrusting each of us with this role.

"Adolf! Hey, it's Adolf! You're alive!"

"Yeah. I somehow managed thanks to Mister Takahiro."

Adolf served as an instructor at the army garrison in Diospyro. Through his introduction, we were able to contact the army. One other unexpected blessing came from our visit too.

"What? Prince Philip is here as well?" Adolf asked.

“Yeah. He got here just this morning. He took a fast horse to come back.”

Aker’s second prince, Philip Kendall, had been taken prisoner by the Maclaurin Provincial Army, but he had now returned to Diospyro. Takahiro had previously made an agreement with Prince Philip to build cooperative ties between them, so in a sense, he was the best member of the Akerian royal family to carry out our talks with.

“I’m glad you made it here,” Prince Philip said.

In fact, we were granted an audience with the prince right away. The moment he received news of our arrival, he’d made a request to meet us himself.

“I hear you’ve taken on the role of Takahiro’s envoys. Well done in getting here. I’m told this is about the elves from the reclamation villages?”

“Exactly, Your Highness. I’ve come here as Rapha’s representative,” Leah answered. “This should be my husband’s job, but the injuries he suffered while resisting the Maclaurin Provincial Army still haven’t healed, so I have come in his stead. Also, this is my granddaughter, and she’ll be participating as my guard and assistant.”

“I’m Helena.”

Helena lowered her head stiffly as the conversation turned toward her. Philip gave her a composed nod, then shifted his focus.

“And that’s...”

“It’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Your Highness. I am Ella of Draconia.”

Ella bowed. She maintained a gentle smile yet showed no signs of timidity when faced with royalty. As the oldest daughter of her great mother, she respected the status of the prince, but she didn’t feel obliged to him.

“I have come along on this occasion as an escort,” Ella said.

“Draconia? Forgive me, I haven’t heard of it before. Are you from abroad?”

“It’s definitely not a part of this country. You may not be aware of it, but for some time, we’ve been living in hiding in the Dark Woods on the northern Akerian border. I am one among the dragon clan that lived there. Right now, I

serve as its temporary elder.”

“Meaning, when the provincial army was attacked...”

“Aah, you were there as a prisoner of this so-called Maclaurin Provincial Army, weren’t you? Yes, at that last stage, we lent Lord Takahiro a little aid.”

“Oooh! So it really was you! I’m so glad to meet you.” Philip grinned broadly and took Ella’s hand. “Thank you. Because of your intervention, I was able to escape from the provincial army’s grasp.”

His attitude toward Ella was very favorable. As royalty, he could of course mask his inner thoughts, but these appeared to be his genuine feelings. I had been a little anxious about his reaction because Ella was a dragon, but Prince Philip had already spoken with all of Takahiro’s servants. There’d been no need for me to worry.

Our talks also progressed smoothly, so that was a relief. At the same time, I was a little disappointed in myself for being unable to do anything but odd jobs.

Incidentally, although Lobivia looked as though she weren’t doing anything, she was a proper escort during our journey. What’s more, she was here as a representative of Takahiro’s servants. Of the other servants who could enter town, Lily had to focus on treating the many injured, Rose had taken significant damage and was in the middle of repairing herself, and Shiran couldn’t spend too much time away from Takahiro. Lobivia was the only one capable of doing this job.

In contrast, I couldn’t really do anything. At most, I could prepare meals during our journey, but Leah and Ella were naturally much better at cooking than me. I’d helped, but it felt more like I was taking lessons the whole time.

There was no point in feeling down, though. Takahiro had asked me to do this, so I just had to do what I could, even if that was no more than simple chores. For that reason, I renewed my determination.



Or so I’d thought, but how had it come to this?

“Now then, let’s get to it.”

I was sitting at a table facing Prince Philip. With him were the main authorities of Diospyro's army. Lobivia was with me at the center, and the others were all to either side of us. However, this seating order was odd.

"Huh? Huh? Why?"

"What's there to be confused about?" Prince Philip asked, finding our seating arrangement perfectly natural.

"I-I mean, I'm just an attendant, and no more than a squire..."

"Yes, that's right. You're one of the splendid candidates for the Alliance Knights who fight at humanity's front line in Fort Tilia. You are also now a part of Takahiro's group, so it is only fitting for you to be sitting there."

There was an air of remonstrance in his tone. Regardless, I still didn't get it. I gave him a troubled look, and after he sank into thought for a bit, Prince Philip nodded.

"Hmm. Let's make it perfectly clear right now so that it reaches Takahiro's ears too. Just the other day, Takahiro became even more important to this country than when I first met him."

"Huh?"

"We have no choice but to protest the Maclaurin Provincial Army's actions from this point onward. We cannot protect our citizens unless we do. We also must clear Takahiro's name, or he will once more be targeted as the 'fake savior' in the name of justice. In other words, we must denounce the margrave's actions regarding this 'fake savior subjugation' to accomplish both these goals. Do you understand up to this point?"

Prince Philip explained things to me at length as if waiting for me to come to grips with the situation. I nodded back to him, and he continued.

"Very good. Therefore, I believe we can wipe away the dishonor done to Takahiro's name by spreading news of his achievements in protecting the elves. On top of that, by building close ties between Aker and Takahiro, we can even oppose the highly influential margrave."

"So, basically, is this what you're getting at?" I said after sorting things out in

my head. “You are already focusing on the future. You believe Takahiro will play a big role, and you consider me as part of his group?”

I felt a chill run up my spine. If this meeting had such implications, then as an individual, I couldn’t afford to just be an errand girl. Now that I thought of it, everyone we brought along was pretty dense when it came to military matters. That went for Leah and Helena, who were from a small village, as well as Ella and Lobivia, who were dragons. Adolf was different, but he was one of Prince Philip’s people to begin with.

That, of course, didn’t change the fact that I was basically no more than a messenger, but there was a big difference between passing a message through someone who truly understood and doing so through someone who didn’t. That was my job.

“I understand, Your Highness.”

Philip’s eyes widened a little in surprise. I didn’t quite understand the reason for his reaction, but it seemed that he didn’t have a bad impression of me, and his slight sigh afterward sounded friendly.

Not that I had the brain capacity to think about this any more than I already had. Right now, I had to fulfill my duty. I took a deep breath.

“Then let us get right to it,” I said. “I have a letter for you from Takahiro.”



“I’m beat...”

After going back to the room that’d been prepared for us, I plopped down on my bed. I was completely exhausted. I still had plenty of stamina, but being so tense for so long had worn me out.

“Good work out there,” Leah said with a giggle.

“Thank you... You too, Leah.”

As we talked, Leah and Helena went to the bed farther inside. Ella took a seat on a chair. Adolf wasn’t with us; he had his own house in Diospyro, so he’d gone back there. As for Lobivia, she’d taken a seat next to me on the bed.

Her wavy tail plopped down right in front of me. The way it seemed so

inviting was probably because people craved some body warmth when they were dead tired. I reached out in a daze and touched her tail, and Lobivia started. She turned to me with a frown.

“Hey...”

“Heh heh...”

I chuckled, and she gave me a sour look, but she didn’t complain, likely because she was being considerate of my exhaustion. I was grateful. Her scaly tail was warm and felt so nice. That was when I noticed Helena’s gaze. She looked like she wanted to say something.

“What is it?” I asked.

“You’re surprisingly amazing,” she said.

“Hwuh?”

For some reason, she suddenly praised me. I stared back at her in wonder.



“How so?” I asked.

“You spoke with Prince Philip so boldly.”

“Aah, that... Did I?”

“‘Did I?’ she says. Seriously...” Helena looked a little astonished.

I cocked my head. “I was so desperate that I don’t really have a sense of doing it. It’s a good thing we got the results we wanted, though.”

I recalled today’s events as we talked. After looking at Takahiro’s letter—written by Shiran—Prince Philip had asked in detail about the villagers’ current situation. Both Leah and Helena were naturally deeply involved themselves, but I’d carefully gone through everything so he could understand.

Also, I had managed to get some specifics out of Prince Philip regarding the ties he wanted to build with Takahiro. Spurred by my sense of duty, I’d proactively asked many questions. As a result, I knew that Prince Philip was serious about building an alliance with Takahiro and that he had many thoughts on his mind. A messenger had already been sent to His Majesty the King, so once we received a reply, we would most likely be going to the capital with everyone else from the reclamation village.

When that happened, the kingdom of Aker would finally become Takahiro’s ally. Or perhaps it could also be said that Takahiro would finally become Aker’s ally. That was what it meant to make an alliance.

As I recalled this, the tail I was still touching shook about as if to get my attention.

“Say, Kei?”

“Hm? What is it, Lobivia?”

“Will this work?” she asked, looking over her shoulder at me.

There was a hint of anxiety in her voice. Lobivia had lost her home only a few days ago. Her mother had passed before they’d gotten the chance to reconcile too. It must have been so sad and hard for her. Takahiro had been worried about this too, so until Lobivia insisted, he’d had no intention of sending her as an envoy.

Instead of secluding herself when she was down, she did everything that she could. She was such a strong girl. Still, that didn't mean she was emotionless.

"It's okay," I said, giving her tail a good patting. "We made a good amount of headway."

Prince Philip intended to make Takahiro's achievements while defending the villagers known far and wide. He was going to wash away the slanderous title of fake savior that the Maclaurin Provincial Army had already spread about and give Takahiro the acknowledgment he deserved. However, there was apparently one more facet to this.

Because of the provincial army, it was now known that Takahiro's companions were monsters, which was a major problem. It was difficult to accept monsters, after all. On the other hand, it would be a different story if they were "the heroes who protected Aker's citizens when they were about to be massacred by the tyrannical Maclaurin Provincial Army."

Prince Philip's plan was to restore Takahiro's honor and secure a foundation for him in Aker in one fell stroke. Nevertheless, from another perspective, this meant that Takahiro would become "Aker's savior."

I could easily picture his troubled expression. Takahiro was a visitor, but not a savior. That was what he believed, at least. He had no aspirations of becoming a hero, and he thought it was impossible for him to be one in the first place. One could say that he'd given up on the idea entirely. And yet he was the type to grit his teeth and endure for the sake of things he refused to give up on. If that resulted in him becoming Aker's savior, then the threads of fate were strange indeed.

Having said that, I doubted Takahiro would reject Prince Philip's plan. He wouldn't hesitate to create a place in this world for his dear servants. That was the kind of person he was. He would certainly smile bitterly about it, though.

That thought put me in a pleasant mood. I wanted to see what kind of face he'd make right away.

"Relax. We'll have good news to bring back to Takahiro," I said.

"That so? Good," Lobivia replied.

I continued stroking Lobivia's tail as my thoughts drifted to the near future. First, Takahiro had to set up a foundation and establish an alliance with Aker. Then he had to join forces with them to oppose the Maclaurin Provincial Army. It was sure to be quite the ordeal for him, but I was going to do everything I could to help. With those thoughts in mind, my eyelids grew heavier and heavier, until they shut completely.

The companion of Aker's savior. The next chief of one of Aker's reclamation villages. Holding these two important titles, how was I going to be of help to Takahiro? That is a story for another time.

Extra Story: Together Forever

At Philip's discretion, we made our way to Aker's capital about ten days after escaping the Maclaurin Provincial Army. The reason it'd taken a little more time than expected was because we'd proceeded with all due caution. We had been instructed to go to the nearby town first, and once their preparations were done, we moved to the capital as a big group.

With that, we could finally leave the elves' safety to the army. Relieved of that responsibility, I took my companions and went to Diospyro. There, we reunited with Philip and held more talks with him, mostly because we needed to work out several conditions before we moved on to the capital.

One such condition was the dragons of Draconia. They'd lost their home, and the Mist Barrier that'd hidden them from humanity was gone. They had nowhere left to go, so something had to be done.

As a result of our discussions, it was determined that they would be accepted in Aker as my servants. Strictly speaking, they weren't, but the people of Aker wouldn't be able to see the difference. Ella and her siblings agreed to it too.

During that time, Philip actively contacted many others. Part of this was to spread news that "Majima Takahiro and his servant monsters risked their lives to protect elves." Honestly speaking, I questioned whether it would be so simple, but ironically, the Maclaurin Provincial Army's actions worked in our favor.

The people of Aker were extremely wary of the provincial army due to its transgression into their borders, and they'd been paying close attention to the army's movements. During such a sensitive period, a member of the respected Akerian royal family had been taken prisoner, and a reclamation village had been attacked. News spread through the streets in no time at all.

Nevertheless, we didn't get any opportunities to hear these rumors about us. We couldn't just go loitering around the capital, so we ended up staying at the castle. Although, maybe it was a good thing that I didn't hear them. According

to the reports Philip received, things had gotten rather crazy. When he asked me whether I wanted to hear the details, I'd shaken my head basically on reflex.

Nonetheless, I'd agreed to Philip's proposal because I'd been ready for this to happen, so maybe it was best to resign myself to this situation. After all, we had managed to set the foundations for the people of Aker to accept Lily and the others. Next was to determine how we'd make use of this opportunity.

For the next few days, we had continuous meetings and dinners with Aker's royalty, army, and cabinet ministers. These served the purpose of introducing not only me, but my servants as well, so Lily and Shiran accompanied me. It was a big help to have Philip by our side during all this.

We also had the chance to meet Aker's king. He was an old man who looked just like Philip would if he'd gotten on in years. They'd already talked things through, so he readily agreed to form an alliance between us. When I spoke of his daughter, the commander of the Third Company of the Alliance Knights, the fatherly expression he made left quite the impression.

During our stay, we received surprising news about the Maclaurin Provincial Army. We didn't know the full details yet, but it was certain that they'd been annihilated. Maybe we would find something out when the knights who'd gone to investigate returned. All we knew for now was that the direct threat we'd been wariest of had unexpectedly vanished.

That said, even if the army under Louis Bard's command had been eliminated, the man who'd sent them, Margrave Glantri Maclaurin, was still perfectly fine. It was possible that his righteous heart remained as stout as ever or that his animosity had only been amplified. Also, this was nothing more than the end of the army that'd been dispatched to Aker. It was a catastrophic loss for sure, but even without the immediate threat around, we still had to protest the margrave's actions. Aker had already made a public announcement to its fellow Alliance members, the feudal lords of the Empire, and the Holy Church.

And so I continued passing my days creating a foundation for us in Aker, when one day...

"I think it's about time," Katou said.

She'd called me out for a meeting after dinner. Rose was with us too. Having

repaired all her damage by now, she looked at her best friend curiously.

“Mana? What are you talking about? You did mention having something to speak of in secret...”

Rose had apparently come along without asking any questions. There was a pure and defenseless trust behind that behavior. If she had been just a little more suspicious, she might’ve been able to predict what was going on based on the fact that Katou had made these preparations beforehand, ensuring that Lily wasn’t with me. It was actually obvious something was up, but Rose didn’t doubt her for a second. She didn’t have the capacity to. She would never think that her best friend would set a trap for her.

Everything had been scrupulously prepared. In other words, Rose had nowhere to run.

“Okay, Rose. Let me tell you why I asked you here today,” Katou said with an unassuming smile. “It’s punishment time.”



In the last moments of our flight from the Maclaurin Provincial Army, Rose had stayed behind on her own and thrown herself into a hopeless battle. The moment she found out about this, Katou had looked as if she were on the verge of death. When Rose returned, Katou had cried and hugged her, waffling between anger and relief, and hadn’t let go for a good while.

“I seriously thanked God back then,” Katou said. “Hee hee. It’s strange, isn’t it? I normally don’t even believe in God.”

“Mana...”

Rose looked extremely apologetic as Katou sadly spoke of these things.

“So, at the time, I swore to punish you for being so reckless,” Katou said, smiling faintly. “No matter what happens, I’ll definitely do it. That’s what I swore to myself.”

“Yes... What?” Rose had been listening earnestly and nodding along, but then she immediately made a quizzical face. “Please wait, Mana. I don’t understand where this is going anymore.”

“Hee hee. Unfortunately, you don’t have a say in this.”

Katou casually ignored Rose’s bewilderment. She was scary when she was seriously angry. After all, both the legendary Great White Spider of the Depths and one of the highest ranking members among the saviors, the Skanda, were frightened of her. Katou thoroughly took advantage of her opponents’ weaknesses, which applied here too.

“Well then, Senpai, I leave the rest to you.”

“No way, it can’t be... Master?!”

Trembling, Rose turned to me, and Katou left, smiling the whole while. The door closed with a clack.

Now that we were alone, I smiled. Well, I wasn’t going to do anything mean to her. Katou could be a little devil sometimes. She probably found it fun to tease the ever-innocent Rose. In fact, she’d been in high spirits about this. Thanks to that, though, things were pretty confusing now.

“Master, what exactly is going on?” Rose asked, turning to me slowly.

“What do you mean? She told you this is your punishment.”

Much like Katou, I also remembered the day I got Rose back with my own hands. After these last few days, we’d finally gotten some time, so Katou and I had plotted this together. We’d also decided on what to do already.

“Well, take a seat.”

I sat down on the bed, and Rose took a seat next to me. Even though she didn’t understand what was going on, she obeyed. I turned toward her and restated what was going on.

“From here on out, I’m gonna pamper you.”

“What do you mean by that?” Rose asked curiously. “Aah, no, forgive me. It’s not that I have any objections. I will accept any order you have, Master. Even if there is no definite reason for it.”

“I mean, I’m not the type to punish someone without a reason.”

When a beautiful girl in a maid outfit said stuff like that, it sounded really

indecent, so I'd rather she stopped. I didn't have that kind of fetish.

"Forgive me. But, Master, how is pampering punishment?"

"Aah, I'm pretty sure it will be."

After thinking it over again, I nodded back to her. In truth, I was sure this was going to be effective.

"Let's see..." I said. "First, you don't need to do anything for the rest of the day."

"Anything...?" Rose started and froze, likely thinking about what this meant. It was a very mechanical gesture, one that was pretty rare from her lately.

"Forgive me. By 'anything,' what do you mean, exactly?"

"Anything is anything. Anything and everything. You don't need to work."

Rose fell silent once more. She was expressionless, but I knew that meant she was thinking about it real hard, so it was cute. After a few seconds, she responded.

"By 'don't need to work'...that means it's fine for me to work too?" she asked.

"So it's come to this..."

It was just like Rose to not even consider playing and having a good time. As a servant, she prioritized achieving the meaning of her existence above all else. In this sense, her thought pattern differed from a human's.

"Let me rephrase that," I said, pushing a finger against my temple. "Work is forbidden. You can't do it at all."

"Huh? Th-That can't be. P-Please don't joke around like that."

She was extremely flustered. It was almost pitiful, but I couldn't pamper her. Wait. No. This *was* pampering her.

"I'm not joking. On the contrary, if there's something you want me to do for you, I want you to tell me."

"S-Something I want you to do for *me*?! M-Master, that can't be. This is problematic. Please do not say such outrageous things."

"I'm not saying anything outrageous."

She was making a face as if I were making a cruel demand of her. Moved by this, I felt the urge to bring this whole thing to a stop... Wouldn't it normally be the other way around?

"Even if you say such things..." Rose began.

At any rate, it was true that this troubled her. I didn't think it'd be this bad, so it was a little problematic for me too. Maybe we screwed up. It was suddenly difficult to keep going. That said, it would be unfortunate to stop here, so after thinking about it a little, I nodded.

"Well, I guess it can't be helped this time."

"Aah, so you understand now, Mas— Hyah?!"

Rose's voice cracked. That was because I'd hefted her entire body up and pulled her in closer. She was tall for a woman, but with the amount of mana enhancing my physical strength now, it wasn't all that hard. I sat her on top of my lap, turned facing to the side, keeping her in my arms.

"Master?!"

We were about the same height, so by doing this, Rose's face was just a little higher than mine. I looked up, and the moment her eyes met mine, all strength left her body.

"M-Master? What is the meaning of this?"

"I just figured that if you're not gonna say it, I'll make a move myself."

It was simple logic.

"S-So why do something like this?" she asked.

"Hm? I mean, didn't you always want to be carried in my arms like this?"

"How do you know that?!" Rose jolted in shock, nearly sending both of us toppling over.

"Katou told me," I said after regaining my balance.

"Mana?!"

"She said you wouldn't tell me what you wanted on your own."

“That’s true, so I can’t argue, but...!”

As always, Katou was thoroughly prepared. She’d opened up some time to do this today out of consideration to begin with. Seeing that we’d had no time to ourselves despite the fact that we’d conveyed our feelings to each other, Katou had forcefully created the opportunity for us, which resulted in this situation.

Much like a puppy in my arms, Rose clasped her hands before her chest and curled into herself. It wasn’t that she hated this; it was more that she had no idea what to do. Her body was as soft as any human’s, and only the feel of her ball joints was different. Their sensation wasn’t bad, though. That was just Rose. It actually made me regret not doing this earlier.

“You’re a puppet, so maybe you instinctively want to be held in someone’s arms. If you had only told me, I’d have done it for you.”

Regardless of whether we had feelings for each other, if she had only asked for that much, I’d have responded without question. However, Rose shook her head.

“That isn’t all. I can’t deny it’s my instinct as a puppet...but I wanted you to hold me tight in your arms, not just as a puppet, but as a girl.”

“Rose...”

Just that made me feel it was worth making time for this, because I now knew how innocently she yearned for me.

Rose placed her hand against her neck and pulled out the pendant that’d been hanging inside her clothes. It was the present I’d given her on that date some time back.

“During our escape from the Maclaurin Provincial Army, you embraced me. I thought my wish had been granted. I thought I had no more regrets, but I was wrong.”

She gazed at the small gem in her palm as she recalled that time.

“When I faced my death, I realized that I had regrets for things still undone. That’s also when I realized that that was because I was in love.”

In that instant, the explosive joy and sorrow she’d felt had pierced the

darkness created by the Holy Water and Travis. Just remembering the premonition of loss I'd felt at the time made me tremble. If I'd lost her, I wouldn't have been able to hear of these feelings that she'd kept locked in her heart.

"I'm really glad you're still here with me..."

"Master?"

"Never do anything like that again. Seriously. I want you to know how important you are to me. No matter how dearly I treat you, it never feels like it's enough."

I stroked her cheek to make sure she was there. I combed her gray hair and touched her lips. I pulled her in with the arm I had around her back. I could sense her existence through every part of her I touched, but that still wasn't enough. It was hopelessly insufficient. I didn't want to even think about losing her.

"Forgive me. I caused you so much anxiety," she said.

"You really did. I won't forgive you so easily even if you apologize."

That was what this moment was for. I wanted her to understand how much I thought of her, even if only a little. I wanted her by my side forever. I brought my face closer, a distance meant for lovers, and spoke once more.

"Remember this. I'm never letting go of you again."

"Of course, Master. I'm your puppet...your lover, after all."

We smiled at each other, and exchanged a vow—a vow between master and puppet, or perhaps one between a mediocre boy and an innocent girl. This vow would never be broken.

That was when I suddenly realized something.

"By the way, you mentioned 'regrets' earlier, right? When you faced the provincial army, you realized you 'had regrets for things still undone.' What were they?"

"Huh?"

I couldn't forget we were still in the middle of punishing Rose.

"It means there was something else you wanted to do besides being embraced, something that came from realizing you were in love. What was it, specifically?"

Rose immediately panicked and began waving her hands about in front of her chest meaninglessly. She was so pure and innocent. At this rate, it would take a long time before she ever told me her wish. But that didn't matter to me. There was no need to rush, because we were going to be together forever.

And so we passed our time sweetly in each other's company, something that would happen many times to come until the night had passed.

Monster Tamer

12

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Minto Higure
Illustrator
Napo





“Thanks
for lending
us a hand.”

“Man,
that one
was pretty
tough,
huh?”

JINGUJI TOMOYA
2ND YEAR HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT
THE DRAGON

OKAZAKI TAKUMA
2ND YEAR HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT
THE ALMIGHTY VESSEL



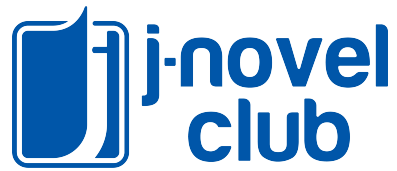












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Monster Tamer: Volume 12

by Minto Higure

Translated by Hikoki Edited by Suzanne Seals

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Original Japanese edition published in 2018 by Futabasha Publishers Ltd.

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Ebook edition 1.0: February 2023